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Conservation group lawsuit seeks to speed listing of Alaska king salmon under Endangered Species Act

May 12, 2025 by Nathaniel Herz, Northern Journal (<https://www.ktoo.org/author/nathaniel-herz/>)

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A chinook salmon. (Ryan Hagerty/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

A Washington state-based conservation group filed a lawsuit this week in an effort to speed up the federal government's review of a proposal to list king salmon as threatened or endangered across the Gulf of Alaska.

The Wild Fish Conservancy [filed its lawsuit](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/25935194-wfc-dc-complaint/?ref=northernjournal.com) (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/25935194-wfc-dc-complaint/?ref=northernjournal.com>) Thursday in U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., saying that the National Marine Fisheries Service had missed a 12-month deadline under the Endangered Species Act to decide on the conservancy's proposal to list Gulf of Alaska king salmon.

The conservancy, in its [17-page complaint \(https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/25935194-wfc-dc-complaint/?ref=northernjournal.com\)](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/25935194-wfc-dc-complaint/?ref=northernjournal.com), said it formally asked the service to list the king salmon in a petition Jan. 11, 2024, which gave the agency until Jan. 11, 2025, to respond. The lawsuit asks a judge to order the service to “promptly issue” its decision on the petition by a specific date.

“With the crisis facing Alaskan chinook, we are out of time and options,” Emma Helverson, Wild Fish Conservancy’s executive director, said in a prepared statement, using another name for king salmon. She added: “The Endangered Species Act sets clear deadlines for a reason, to evaluate the risk of extinction and trigger action while recovery is still possible.”

The conservancy’s [press release announcing the lawsuit \(https://wildfishconservancy.org/lawsuit-seeks-overdue-federal-decision-on-esa-protections-for-alaskan-chinook-salmon-in-peril/?ref=northernjournal.com\)](https://wildfishconservancy.org/lawsuit-seeks-overdue-federal-decision-on-esa-protections-for-alaskan-chinook-salmon-in-peril/?ref=northernjournal.com) points to [other listing proposals \(https://wildfishconservancy.org/lawsuit-filed-over-delay-of-federal-protections-for-olympic-peninsula-steelhead/?ref=northernjournal.com\)](https://wildfishconservancy.org/lawsuit-filed-over-delay-of-federal-protections-for-olympic-peninsula-steelhead/?ref=northernjournal.com) that the fisheries service had failed to act on within 12 months and described “systemic dysfunction” at the agency.

A top Alaska official at the fisheries service, Jon Kurland, said in a brief email Friday that the agency is “continuing to review the petition and to develop the required 12-month finding.”

The lawsuit to force action from the fisheries service is “fairly routine,” said Doug Vincent-Lang, fish and game commissioner for the state of Alaska, which [has opposed \(https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=pressreleases.pr&release=2024_05_23&ref=northernjournal.com\)](https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=pressreleases.pr&release=2024_05_23&ref=northernjournal.com) the conservancy’s proposal and numerous other efforts to list species as endangered in Alaska.

Vincent-Lang said that the fisheries service is “working through the process” — if, perhaps, slowed by the change in presidential administrations — and that two state scientists have been given access to a team reviewing the petition, though they’re not voting members.

“I understand they’re getting closer to a decision,” he said. “I’d much rather have them take their time and have a deliberative process than to rush to a decision because of a statutory timeline.”

The conservancy has taken multiple actions in Alaska in recent years that have drawn sharp rebukes from the state’s elected officials and commercial fishermen.

Another lawsuit filed by the group with the intent of preserving salmon as prey for endangered Pacific Northwest orca whale populations threatened to close down Southeast Alaska’s small-boat troll fishery.

And Vincent-Lang has expressed concerns that, if the Endangered Species Act listing of Gulf of Alaska king salmon is approved, it could lead to sharp restrictions on harvests of the fish, as well as in other salmon fisheries that accidentally hook or harvest kings.

The conservancy says that Alaska king salmon are threatened by accidental harvest in trawl fisheries, and by fish hatcheries, habitat destruction, climate change and overfishing.

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