

Washington Legislature funds final push to rid Puget Sound of derelict fishing nets

Local News

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OLYMPIA, Wash. - The final push in a decade-long effort to clear Puget Sound of derelict fishing nets within 105 feet of the surface will get under way later this year with funding approved by the Washington State Legislature. The state budget adopted last month provides \$3.5 million for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to complete the task in partnership with the Northwest Straits Foundation, which has led the net-removal effort since 2002. Since then, divers working for the non-profit organization have removed 4,437 lost or abandoned fishing nets, 2,765 crab pots and 42 shrimp pots from the waters of Puget Sound. Animals found dead or entangled in that gear include porpoises, sea lions, seabirds, canary rockfish, chinook salmon and Dungeness crab. According to one predictive catch model, those derelict nets were entangling 3.2 million animals annually every year they remained in the water. Robyn du Pré, executive director of the foundation, said the new funding will support the removal of approximately 1,000 derelict nets in high-priority areas of Puget Sound after current funding runs out in December.

“These legacy nets have been fishing the waters of the Salish Sea for decades,” du Pré said. “We are thrilled to have the opportunity to finish the job and to celebrate a true conservation success story in 2015.” Du Pré added that current fishing net loss is minimal and commercial fishers are now required to report any lost nets. State Rep. Norma Smith of Whidbey Island led the legislative effort to fund the net-removal initiative. “I am deeply grateful to my colleagues who helped achieve the goal of a \$3.5 million appropriation for the Northwest Straits Foundation to remove the last of the legacy nets from the Puget Sound,” Smith said. “Lost in previous decades, they have had a devastating impact on harvestable natural resources and marine life. Once removed, because of the reporting requirements now in place, this challenge comes to an end. What an achievement!” WDFW Director Phil Anderson said the new funding is specifically designed to support the removal of derelict fishing nets in areas of the Sound where historic fisheries coincide with bottom conditions likely to snag nets. The foundation locates those nets using sidescan sonar surveys, then dispatches recovery vessels with dive teams to retrieve them. Few efforts have been made to remove nets from depths of more than 105 feet, because of safety concerns. However, the foundation recently completed an assessment of deepwater net-removal strategies that include the use of remotely operated vehicles, grapples, and deepwater divers. “Working in conjunction with our partners at Northwest Straits and in the State Legislature, we have made enormous strides toward eliminating the risks posed to fish and wildlife by derelict fishing gear,” Anderson said. “This is difficult work, and it requires a real commitment from everyone to get it done. We look forward to celebrating the next milestone in 2015.”