

2026 Salish Sea Vessel Traffic Projections Report

Executive Summary

The Salish Sea continues to face unprecedented pressure from proposed new and expanding marine shipping projects. Since publication of the 2024 Salish Sea Vessel Traffic Projections report, several major projects have advanced through permitting and construction phases, while others have begun operations.

Based on current project information available as of August 2026, Friends of the San Juans estimates that twelve major industrial, fossil fuel, cargo, and passenger **projects could increase ocean-going vessel transits in the Salish Sea by approximately 1,980 transits per year, representing a 16.6% increase above the 2025 baseline** of 11,944 annual transits. If all proposed projects are completed and operating as planned, **annual ocean-going vessel traffic could rise to approximately 13,924 transits per year.**

The largest anticipated increases are associated with container shipping, crude oil exports, LNG (liquified natural gas) exports, cruise ships, and cargo terminal expansions. Eight of the twelve projects that will increase vessel traffic are in British Columbia and rely on shipping routes that traverse the Canada-U.S. border within the Salish Sea, including the Strait of Juan de Fuca, Haro Strait, Boundary Pass, and Georgia Strait.

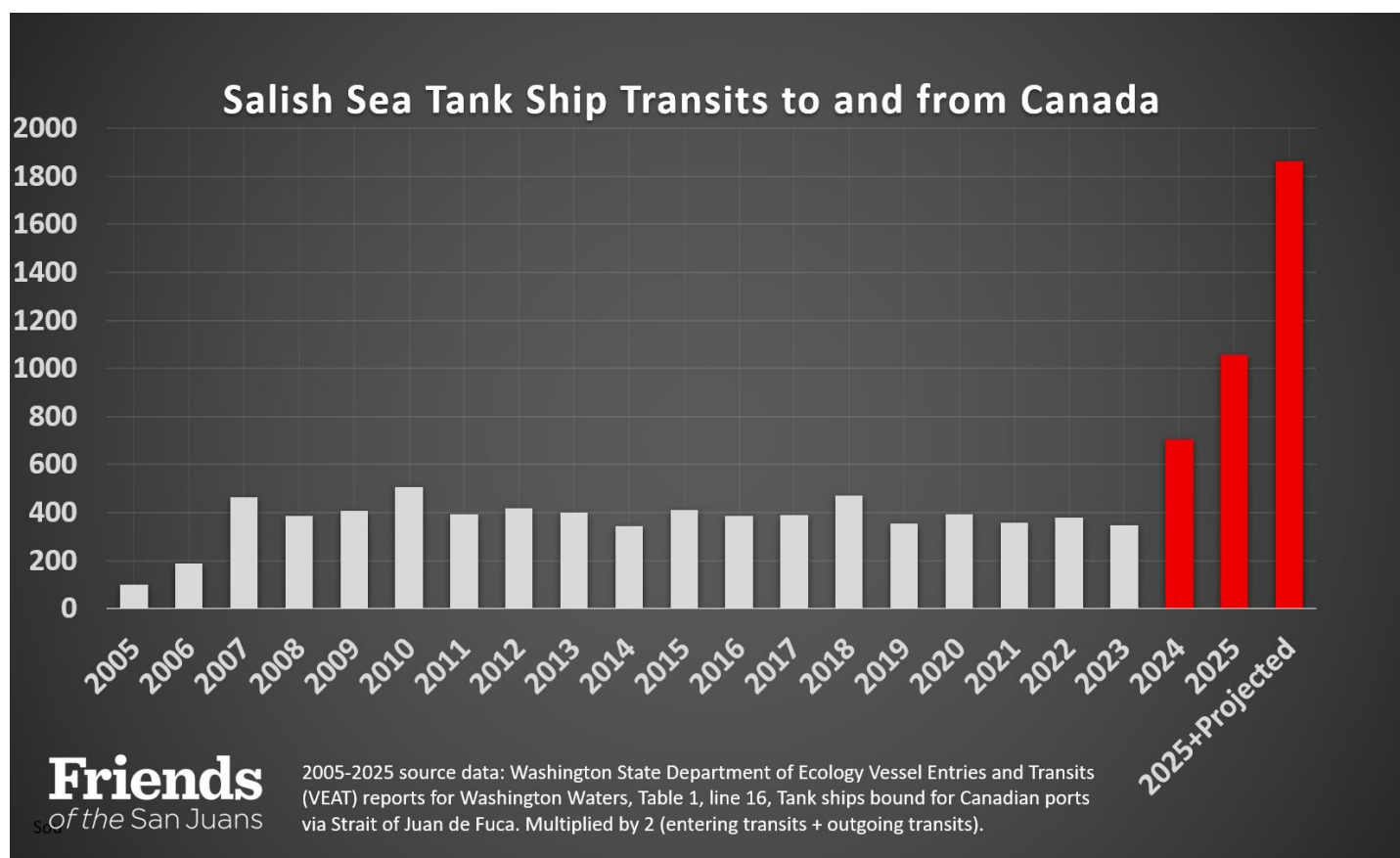
If all currently proposed and permitted projects proceed, the additional annual vessel transits would significantly increase cumulative impacts throughout the Salish Sea. More vessel traffic would increase congestion in already challenging navigation corridors, elevate the risk of oil and hazardous cargo spills, and generate additional greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution, and toxic scrubber discharges that contaminate marine food webs. Increased shipping places greater pressure on Tribal and First Nations cultural and treaty-protected resources and further threatens the recovery of Southern Resident killer whales through increased underwater noise, disruption of foraging behavior, and a higher risk of vessel strikes.

Key Findings

- **1,980 additional ocean-going vessel transits per year** projected throughout the Salish Sea
- 11,944 ocean-going vessel transits in 2025 and 13,924 projected for 2026, reflecting a **16.6% increase in annual vessel traffic**
- Four of the twelve projects identified account for more than one-third of the projected increase in Salish Sea vessel traffic.

Most concerning is the recent and projected increase in tanker traffic to Canadian ports.

The projected increase of nearly **1,900 annual transits** is driven largely by Canada's increase in fossil fuel exports. From 2007 to 2023, annual tanker traffic to and from Salish Sea ports in Canada remained relatively stable, averaging 400 voyages per year. Tanker traffic surpassed 700 transits in 2024 and exceeded 1,000 transits in 2025.¹ Tanker traffic more than tripled from 346 transits in 2023 to 1,056 transits 2025, dramatically increasing the risk of accidents and major oil spills. Proposed Canadian projects, including a new one-million-barrel-per-day pipeline and export terminal at Roberts Bank, just north of the U.S.-Canada border, could more than quadruple historic tanker traffic levels, further increasing the risk of accidents and major oil spills.



Proposed Canadian projects could more than quadruple historic tanker traffic levels.

Canada is proposing to use Very Large Crude Carriers to export the tar sands crude oil (also known as diluted bitumen or dilbit) from a new export terminal at Roberts Bank. This would add one Very Large Crude Carrier exporting approximately two million barrels of tar sands

crude oil every other day, resulting in at least 365 more transits per year through the Salish Sea. Two million barrels of crude oil is equivalent to 127 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

To reduce the risk of catastrophic oil spills, Very Large Crude Carriers are prohibited east of Port Angeles ("*east of a line extending from Discovery Island light south to New Dungeness light*") by both WA State and US law.² The Very Large Crude Carriers would transit the narrow passages along the U.S.-Canada border through lower Georgia Strait, Boundary Pass, and Haro Strait, which include extremely risky near 90-degree-turns at both Patos Island and Turn Point.

Cumulative Risks and Impacts of Increased Vessel Traffic

The Salish Sea is one of the world's largest and most biodiverse inland seas, providing habitat for a wide variety of marine species and ecosystems.³ The Salish Sea provides an estimated \$91 - \$153 billion annually in ecosystem services, including fisheries, tourism, recreation, carbon storage and climate regulation, water filtration, flood protection, and cultural and Indigenous values.⁴ The cumulative impacts of the projects identified in this report will be experienced collectively across the Salish Sea's interconnected ecosystem.

The cumulative risks and impacts from nearly 2,000 additional annual vessel transits will increase:

- Congestion in the Salish Sea's high-risk marine traffic zones such as the Turn Point Special Operating Area where ships must make a sharp, almost 90-degree-turn along the Canada-U.S. border.⁵
- The risk of hazardous cargo and oil (both cargo and propulsion fuel) spills.⁶
- Greenhouse gas and air pollutant emissions.⁷ This includes black carbon and other air pollution from ships that use heavy fuel oil with exhaust gas cleaning systems, commonly known as scrubbers.⁸
- Highly acidic and toxic discharges into the marine ecosystem from ships that use heavy fuel oil with exhaust gas cleaning systems, or scrubbers, that negatively impact aquatic life and endangering human health by releasing harmful heavy metals, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), and other toxins into the environment. These toxins accumulate in marine organisms in a process called bioaccumulation and persist and increase in concentration up the food chain in a process called biomagnification.⁹
- Impacts to Tribes' and First Nations' cultural and treaty-protected resources.
- The risk of ship strikes that can result in whale deaths.¹⁰ This is especially concerning for endangered and at-risk populations like the Southern Resident killer whales, where the death of even one whale can have detrimental population consequences.¹¹
- The disruption of Southern Resident killer whales' foraging, disproportionately affecting females which could impact reproduction and population recovery.¹²

- Underwater noise which reduces the ability of whales and other marine species to communicate, navigate, find prey, and respond to threats.¹³ Underwater noise is a significant risk factor affecting the survival and recovery of Southern Resident killer whales.¹⁴

Major New and Expanding Projects (listed by volume of vessel traffic)

1. Roberts Bank Terminal 2

Port of Vancouver, BC

Projected Increase: 520 annual transits

The Roberts Bank Terminal 2 (RBT2) Project remains one of the largest proposed marine infrastructure projects in the Salish Sea. The 267-acre offshore/over-water terminal would be constructed in the Fraser estuary less than one mile from the US-Canada border. This new shipping terminal would be larger than 202 football fields and accommodate Ultra-Large Container Vessels that carry up to 24,000 TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units) and hold millions of gallons of propulsion fuel.¹⁵

Key Biodiversity Areas are sites that play critical roles for species and ecosystems. The Fraser River estuary is the largest Key Biodiversity Area in BC,¹⁶ categorized as being of global importance and critical to the health of the Salish Sea ecosystem. Roberts Bank Terminal 2 would destroy critical habitat in the transboundary Salish Sea, further impacting endangered and at risk species such as Southern Resident killer whales and Chinook salmon along with many migratory birds.

The Global Container Terminals (GCT) Berth Four Project (number 11 in the 2024 report) is not included in this report due to the one-year memorandum of understanding signed in April 2026 to jointly explore developing and operating Roberts Bank Terminal 2.¹⁷

The Port of Vancouver (Vancouver Fraser Port Authority) selected a construction consortium for terminal development.¹⁸ Construction is expected to begin in 2028 and be completed in the mid-2030s. Once operational, the new three-berth marine container ship terminal is expected to increase container handling capacity at the Port of Vancouver by more than 50 percent. On August 28, 2026, Canada provided notice that the *Build Canada Act* may be amended to list RBT2 as a project of national interest:

Listing RBT2 under the Act would move the project from a lengthy approval phase into a more streamlined delivery phase by coordinating remaining permitting, reducing regulatory delays, and accelerating project execution while keeping it aligned with broader national trade corridor priorities.¹⁹

2. Canada's Proposed West Coast Tar Sands Crude Oil Pipeline

Port of Vancouver, BC

Projected Increase: 365 annual transits

On July 2, 2026, Canada announced the route for its new one-million-barrel-per-day crude oil pipeline to the west coast. Canada is upholding the oil tanker ban in northern BC by routing the new pipeline to its southern coast that borders Washington State and the unceded waters of the Salish Sea. According to the submission by the Government of Alberta to the Major Projects Office for listing under the Building Canada Act:

The marine facility at Roberts Bank would be designed to handle large ocean-going tankers. It would include two loading berths capable of serving very large crude carriers. These vessels can carry about 1.9 - 2.2 million barrels of oil per shipment.²⁰

The new marine export terminal would also include 15 crude oil storage tanks totaling 6.5 million barrels, which would fill about 413 Olympic-sized swimming pools. The marine export terminal would cover about 260 hectares (642.47 acres), equivalent to about one square mile.²¹

By routing the new pipeline to Roberts Bank, Canada is preserving protections for one environmentally sensitive coastline by shifting oil tanker impacts and risks into another environmentally sensitive coastline and inland sea that includes Washington waters as well as Southern Resident killer whale critical habitat, Sovereign Nation and Treaty-protected resources, and communities, economies, and environmental resources on both sides of the border.

3. Trans Mountain Westridge Marine Terminal Port of Vancouver, BC

Projected Increase: 226 annual transits

The Trans Mountain Expansion Project was completed in May 2024, increasing pipeline capacity from approximately 300,000 to 890,000 barrels per day. An additional 113 oil tankers are projected to be loaded in 2026 when the terminal is operating at full capacity.²²

Trans Mountain has proposed a further expansion to 1,190,000 barrels per day.²³ This will be achieved by increasing the flow through the existing pipeline and expanding throughput in the Puget Sound Pipeline spur.

The expansion would include dredging sediments in Vancouver, BC's Burrard Inlet to increase export capacity. The dredging will impact marine water quality and habitats by releasing contaminants lodged in the dredged material. This dredging will enable tankers to be fully loaded while wreaking havoc on the surrounding marine environment and Salish Sea ecosystem.²⁴

The Aframax tankers that export tar sands crude oil from Trans Mountain's Westridge Terminal are currently approximately 70% laden (~550,000 barrels per load), or loaded, due

to harbor limitations.²⁵ Dredging will enable the full loading of the Aframax tankers (~750,000 barrels). Dredging is permitted and expected to be completed by late 2026 or early 2027.

The expansion would also include increasing throughput by 60,000 barrels per day in Trans Mountain's Puget Sound pipeline that delivers tar sands crude oil to Washington's four northern refineries: BP Cherry Point, Phillips 66, HF Sinclair, and Marathon Petroleum.²⁶

4. Bellingham Shipping Terminal Modernization Project

Port of Bellingham, Washington

Projected Increase: 192 annual transits

The Port of Bellingham's Shipping Terminal Modernization Project includes multiple unspecified projects that are expected to be completed in 2029.²⁷ In 2021, the US Department of Transportation announced the Marine Highway Designation, M-5 Coastal Connector, which will increase tug and barge traffic between Bellingham, Washington; Southern Oregon; and San Diego, California, and will reduce truck traffic along Interstate 5.²⁸ The Port's expansion includes dock replacement and dredging to deepen the navigation channel.²⁹ In 2024, the Port of Bellingham received a federal \$17.9 million Department of Transportation grant to reconnect the shipping terminal to rail.³⁰

5. Tilbury Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) Phase 2 Expansion

Port of Vancouver, BC

Projected Increase: 136 annual transits

FortisBC's Tilbury Phase 2 LNG Expansion would substantially increase LNG production and storage capacity at its existing Delta, BC facility. The expansion includes a new large LNG storage tank and increased liquefaction capacity.

The *DRAFT Assessment Report for Tilbury Phase 2 LNG Expansion Project* stated, "Tilbury Phase 2 does not include operational shipping in its project description. As a result, an operational shipping assessment was not undertaken for this project," which was contradicted by the statement that a purpose of Tilbury Phase 2 is "to provide a fuel alternative for local and global markets to meet the growing demand."³¹ Friends of the San Juans submitted comments in July 2026, stating that the proposed provincial and federal conditions are insufficient because they are based on an assessment that does not account for the project's environmental, ecological, climate, cultural, economic, health, and community shipping-related risks and impacts. Global markets cannot be met without shipping, and therefore, an operational shipping assessment should be required to address shipping-related impacts.

The federal Decision Statement allows up to 365 LNG vessel calls at the Tilbury marine jetty each year. These calls may include large LNG export carriers, smaller LNG bunker vessels, and barges. No more than 68 annual calls may be made by large export carriers, resulting in

up to 136 ocean-going transits.³² However, the 68-call limit does not apply to LNG bunker vessels that load fuel at Tilbury and travel to other ports to refuel ocean-going ships. These bunker-vessel transits have and will generate additional ocean-going and Salish Sea vessel traffic beyond the 136 annual LNG export carrier transits. Seaspan Energy, which operates three 7,600-cubic-metre LNG bunker vessels, completed its first ship-to-ship LNG bunkering at the Port of Long Beach, California, in December 2024.³³ By July 2026, Seaspan had completed 150 bunkering operations in 18 months and was serving ships at ports including Long Beach, California, Vancouver, BC, and Seattle, WA, with LNG supplied by the Tilbury LNG facility.³⁴ This rapid growth indicates that LNG bunkering could become a significant additional source of vessel traffic associated with the Tilbury expansion project.

6. NEXTClean Fuels

Port Westward, Oregon

Projected Increase: 112 annual transits

The proposed renewable fuels project at Port Westward, OR, along the Columbia River, would produce 50,000 barrels per day of renewable diesel and sustainable aviation fuel when operating at full capacity.³⁵ Local and state permits have been approved. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is preparing an environmental impact statement.³⁶ Environmental organizations, including Columbia Riverkeeper, have filed lawsuits that challenge state permit approvals and federal oversight.³⁷

The project would require unloading up to 115 vessels per year (approximately 10 per month) to receive feedstock materials and require loading up to 56 ocean going vessels per year - approximately 5 per month - to transport renewable diesel produced from the facility to market.³⁸ Depending on vessel routing and fueling requirements, this project's vessel traffic could bunker (refuel) in the Salish Sea.

7. Canada Place Cruise Terminal

Port of Vancouver, BC

Projected Increase: 109 annual transits

Nearly 360 cruise calls are scheduled for the 2026 season, an increase from about 300 calls in 2025. Annual transits were calculated based on the estimated increases in cruise ship calls between 2025 and 2026, adjusting the number so that cruises scheduled to call on both the Port of Vancouver and Port of Seattle are not double counted.³⁹ Of the 21 cruises that call at both the Port of Vancouver and the Port of Seattle, 11 were subtracted from the Port of Vancouver vessel traffic projections and 10 were subtracted from the Port of Seattle vessel traffic projections.⁴⁰

8. DP World Fraser Surrey

Port of Vancouver, BC

Projected Increase: 104 annual transits

The canola oil export terminal was permitted in 2023 and became fully operational in September 2025.⁴¹

9. Woodfibre LNG

Squamish, BC

Projected Increase: 80 annual transits

Construction of the Woodfibre LNG export facility continues in Howe Sound. As of mid-2026, project developers reported construction completion exceeding 65 percent and maintained a targeted in-service date of 2027. The facility will have capacity to export 2.1 million tonnes of LNG annually and is expected to load approximately one LNG carrier every 10 days.⁴²

10. Seattle Cruise Terminals

Port of Seattle, Washington

Projected Increase: 64 annual transits

There will be approximately 330 cruise ship calls and more than two million passengers at the Port of Seattle during the 2026 season. This is an estimated increase from 2025, which saw 298 port calls and an estimated 1.9 million passengers.⁴³ Of the 21 cruises that will call on both the Port of Seattle and the Port of Vancouver, 10 were subtracted from the Port of Seattle vessel traffic projections, and 11 were subtracted from the Port of Vancouver vessel traffic projections.⁴⁴

11. Westshore Terminals Potash Expansion

Port of Vancouver, BC

Projected Increase: 40 annual transits

Construction to expand the existing coal export terminal is expected to be completed in 2026 for approximately 4.5 million metric tonnes of annual potash fertilizer exports on bulk carriers.⁴⁵

12. AltaGas ALA Energy Ferndale Terminal

Ferndale, Washington

Potential Increase: 32 annual transits

The AltaGas ALA Energy Ferndale Terminal submitted a permit application to Whatcom County in September 2024 for 2 new, and 31 previous, unpermitted projects. In 2025, 32 Very Large Gas Carriers exported LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) from the Ferndale Terminal. Depending on court rulings and the permitting process, LPG exports could potentially decrease or increase from 2025's 64 transits to 96 per year.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The Salish Sea is at a crossroads. Major port expansions, fossil fuel export projects, LNG terminals, cruise industry growth, and new cargo facilities together represent one of the largest cumulative increases in vessel traffic ever contemplated for the region.

If all currently proposed, approved, and expanding projects proceed as projected, ocean-going vessel transits could rise by approximately **16.6% above 2025 levels**, increasing annual traffic from **11,944** to **13,924 transits per year**.

This marine traffic growth underscores the need for comprehensive, ecosystem-wide assessments of cumulative impacts, stronger vessel management measures, and coordinated U.S.-Canadian efforts to protect the ecological health of the Salish Sea and the species that depend upon it.

The recent tanker traffic increases and the projected 16.6% increase in vessel traffic, as well as the proposed use of Very Large Crude Carriers, highlight the need for a Salish Sea carrying capacity assessment. To date, no regionwide threshold has been established for the volume and mix of vessel traffic that can safely navigate the Salish Sea. The exponential growth in tanker and Very Large Crude Carrier traffic alongside increases in container, cargo, and cruise ships; and recreational boats; has an unquantified increase in the risk of accidents and oil spills. No regionwide requirements for accident prevention and emergency response that meet the current and future risks have been identified.

Without proactive, coordinated policy intervention, and agreement on ecosystem capacity thresholds, vessel traffic increases cannot be safely managed without unacceptable impacts and risks to our shoreline communities, regional economies, maritime safety, and the marine ecosystem.

Recommended Next Steps

- Initiate a multi-national (U.S., Canada, Tribes, First Nations) carrying capacity assessment.
- Align currently proposed and future project permitting with agreed upon species and ecosystem capacity thresholds.
- Conduct a multi-national cumulative vessel traffic risk assessment and revise accident and oil spill prevention along with oil spill and other emergency response preparedness requirements as needed. If unable to conduct a transboundary assessment, the U.S., Washington State, and Tribes should proceed with an assessment and revised requirements.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of voluntary mitigation measures and consider the expansion of voluntary and/or mandatory mitigation measures (e.g., vessel speed, routing, fuel use)
- Prohibit permits for projects throughout the Salish Sea that could increase vessel traffic until the above recommendations are completed.

Endnotes

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- ¹⁸ Journal of Commerce. July 14, 2026. "[Consortium awarded landmass, wharf contract for Roberts Bank Terminal 2 Project](#)"
- ¹⁹ Canada's Major Projects Office. [Roberts Bank Terminal 2](#).
- ²⁰ Government of Alberta. (July 2, 2026). [West coast oil pipeline project: submission by the Government of Alberta to the Major Projects Office for listing under the Building Canada Act](#).
- ²¹ *Ibid*.
- ²² Trans Mountain's [Corporate Update Q4 2025](#) presentation states that 305 tankers were loaded in 2025, with a total marine loading potential of ~630,000 bpd. Aframax tankers are currently partially loaded with 550,000 barrels according to Reuters. September 8, 2025. "[Ships will be able to load more TMX oil by early 2027, Trans Mountain exec says](#)." At current loading volume, there could be 418 oil tankers per year at full capacity, or an additional 113 oil tankers (226 transits per year).
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