

# Gov. Inslee increases culvert removal investments

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Removing culverts and improving salmon passageways must be prioritized, said **Gov. Jay Inslee** in a recent [news release](#). Inslee announced that the [Washington State Department of Transportation](#) (WSDOT) would begin repairing or replacing state-owned highway culverts that impede on fish migration promptly.

The directive, which is in response to a [court order](#), increases culvert repairs to a total \$275 million over the next two years, compared to the \$100 million the legislature approved this year during the 2019 session. The additional \$175 million for salmon restoration will come from other WSDOT projects.

Said Gov. Inslee via the news release:

This is a matter of urgency. And not just because the courts have told us so. The fate of our salmon is intrinsically tied to our tribes, our orca, our economy and our very identity. That's why I am directing my Department of Transportation to immediately ramp up its culvert repair program and I am using budget flexibility provided by the legislature to increase culvert repair spending to \$275 million in the next biennium.

Since the early 1990s, the state has worked to remove culverts and correct fish passage barriers. In collaboration with public agencies, county and tribal governments and environmental groups through the historic [Forests & Fish Law](#), private timber companies and forestland owners have worked to protect 60,000 miles of streams running through 9.3 million acres of state and private woodlands. After 20 years of the Forests & Fish Law, private forestland owners have:

- Removed more than 7,900 fish passage barriers
- Spent \$314 million to open more than 5,200 miles of fish habitat
- Are on track to clear all fish passage barriers in forested streams by 2021

But the effort to remove culverts from state-owned roadways has taken far too long, critics say, due in large part to the fact that the culvert removal program had been historically underfunded. In 2001, the US government sued the state on behalf of 21 northwest tribes who argued that Washington deprived them of their fishing rights by failing to provide sufficient fish passage.

The court ruled in favor of the tribes and declared that the right of taking fish, secured to the tribes in the [Stevens Treaties](#), requires the state to refrain from building or operating culverts under state-maintained roads that hinder fish passage and thereby reduce the number of fish that would otherwise be available for tribal harvest. The federal court ordered the state to remove state-owned culverts that block habitat for salmon and steelhead by 2030. The matter made its way to the US Supreme Court, where it was [affirmed](#) that Washington state must fix or replace hundreds of culverts.

Work on removing fish-blocking culverts is to begin immediately. According to WSDOT, there are [1,995 fish barriers](#) within the state's highway system. In his news release, Gov. Inslee also underscored that the total \$275 million in funding was just the start and that more work was needed for the state to meet its legal responsibilities.

Said Gov. Inslee:

This is just a one-time down payment on the multibillion-dollar tab legislators left unpaid. Let me be crystal clear: this does not solve the problem. This does not get us off the hook. We need to get this fixed next year. I fully expect legislators to give this issue the serious consideration it deserves when they return next session and deliver an adequate and ongoing funding plan to get this job done.

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