



On The WATERFRONT

Winter 2026 Newsletter

US Operators affected by foreign/illegal bare-boats

By Christine Smith

For years, my husband, Jeffrey, and I have operated the U.S.-flagged M/V David B, offering multi-day small-ship cruises in Alaska and the San Juan Islands. During that time, we've watched a troubling trend grow: foreign-flagged vessels conducting illegal charters that chip away at the livelihoods of small American operators like us. Quiet conversations on the dock have turned into industry-wide concern, and many of us are now asking the same question: How do we protect our businesses when the laws meant to safeguard them go largely unenforced?

Operating under the U.S. flag comes with significant responsibility. Our crew must be American. When we take guests ashore in Alaska's Tongass National Forest, we adhere to strict U.S. Forest Service permits that dictate where and when we can land. In Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve, we underwent an exhaustive concession application process and are bound by stringent reporting requirements, limits on use-days, and entry allocations. We accept these rules because they protect public lands, ensure safety, and create a level playing field for operators who follow them.



M/V David B in Alaska. Northwest Navigation and other charter vessels see impacts from illegal bare-boats. Photo: Northwest Navigation

And yet, that level playing field is being increasingly tilted.

Earlier this year, a headline stopped me mid-doomscroll: "JK Rowling's 291-foot superyacht Samsara was the most-traveled vessel of 2025 and earned millions in charter revenue." We shared a dock with Samsara in Auke Bay last June. Her market isn't ours, of course, but vessels like hers, with foreign flagging and "bareboat" charter labels, operate in ways that affect all small U.S. maritime businesses. They sidestep regulations, fees, and requirements that we, as U.S. operators, must meet.

According to U.S. law the Coast Guard rule affecting this state (Section 1.b, NVIC 7-94):

"A valid bareboat charter involves the complete transfer of possession, command, and navigation of the vessel from the owner to the charterer," and "If the owner selects, hires, or provides the crew - even indirectly - the arrangement is not a bareboat charter."

In practice, this standard is rarely met by foreign-flagged vessels. Charter guests do not arrive with their own captain, engineer, and deck crew. They do not provision or navigate the vessel independently. Yet many of these operations are still claiming they are legitimate bareboat charters. When questioned, the response given to the Coast Guard is often a familiar, "We're all just friends on a boat." It is a loophole that has become an industry punchline.

This fall and winter, a coalition of U.S.-flagged operators including small cruise ships, whale-watching companies, day boats, charter fishing vessels, and other local businesses has come together to raise these concerns directly with the U.S. Coast Guard and Customs and Border Protection. Our message is simple: the current lack of enforcement gives foreign-flagged operators an unfair advantage and harms small American businesses.

Here are some of the affected sectors:

- U.S.-Flag Small Cruise Ships

These companies have invested millions over decades to develop legitimate expedition and adventure programs. Now, some foreign cruise lines deploy U.S.-built skiffs or kayaks from their motherships, marketing "small-boat exploration" without adhering to the coastwise laws designed for U.S. operators. The financial loss to legal domestic operators runs into the millions annually.

...continued on back page.

Interim Director DeSimone Steers through transition

By Dan Tucker

Current Interim Director of the Port Tiffany DeSimone's connection to the waterfront runs deep, both professionally and personally. A Whatcom County native, DeSimone graduated from Mount Baker High School and Western Washington University. While she has lived and worked across the country and abroad, her roots and commitment to Whatcom County ultimately drew her home.

DeSimone's career at the Port began more than a decade ago in a temporary role coordinating the Holiday Port festival. Since then, she has risen through the organization, serving in a variety of positions and steadily taking on greater responsibility. Today, as Director of Maritime, and currently Interim Director, she oversees a broad portfolio that includes the Bellingham Shipping Terminal, Squalicum Harbor, Blaine Harbor, the Fairhaven Pier, the Port's internal security team, and a wide range of community-facing programs.

Her passion for the work is rooted in early experiences. Growing up, DeSimone spent significant time in local marinas with her family and later learned to fly at Bellingham International Airport. Those early experiences shaped both her appreciation for the Port's role and in its value to the community. "I love coming to work every day," she shared, adding she truly believes in the work being done.

Stepping into the interim director role has brought new perspective. DeSimone notes the sheer volume of work involved in balancing commission responsibilities, personnel management, operations, and community engagement. Like many organizations navigating leadership transitions, the Port has faced questions and adjustments. DeSimone states her focus is on transparency, accountability, respect, and professionalism to help guide staff through the change.

Looking ahead, she is excited by the scale and variety of projects underway. These range from major investments at the shipping terminal and marina to work in the Whatcom Waterway, as well as onboarding a new commissioner and planning for commission expansion. As she prepares to hand the role off to a permanent director next year, her advice to the incoming head of the Port is simple: "...be curious, be approachable, and be humble."



Interim Director DeSimone. Photo: Port of Bellingham

Member Highlight: Shop 38

By Dan Tucker

Tucked into Colony Wharf since 2010, Shop 38 is a cornerstone of Bellingham's marine trades community, blending deep shipyard tradition with hands-on innovation. The shop's name pays tribute to the "outside machinist" Shop 38 at the Bremerton Naval Shipyard, where the owner's father and grandfather each spent more than 30 years honing their craft. That legacy of precision, problem-solving, and pride in workmanship carries on today.



Shop 38 owner Dave Jennings instructs apprentices in the NW Maritime Apprenticeship Program. Photo: Dan Tucker

Shop 38 is a full-service machine and fabrication shop capable of making or repairing just about anything a vessel might need. The majority of its work supports the commercial fishing and working boat fleet, with roughly 75 percent focused on fluid power systems—hydraulics that are critical to safe and efficient operations on the water. At the same time, the shop provides high-quality machine work for many of the yacht maintenance contractors throughout the harbor, making it a versatile partner across sectors.

What sets Shop 38 apart is the variety of challenges it takes on. No two days look the same. Current projects range from rebuilding a crane for a tender, to refitting a Bristol Bay gillnetter, to the complex task of replacing the bow of a steel vessel with an aluminum one. This constant evolution keeps the work engaging and pushes the shop's capabilities forward.

Looking ahead, Shop 38 sees significant opportunity in serving larger vessels. The planned addition of a heavy haulout facility at Colony Wharf could be transformative, opening the door to major projects and expanded service for the local commercial fishing fleet. With its strategic location—the first stop in Washington on the return from Alaska and easy access to the I-5 corridor—Bellingham is ideally positioned for that growth.

At its heart, Shop 38 thrives on new challenges: projects the team has never tackled before, where creativity and craftsmanship come together to deliver reliable solutions that get vessels of all types back on the water, doing what they do best.

Fisheries Update for Alaska and Salish Sea

By Pete Granger

Salmon Fisheries - Alaska:

The main producing commercial salmon fisheries for Whatcom County fishermen, be they purse seiners, gillnetters, or troller, are in Alaska. During the 2025 fishing season, most areas in Alaska experienced salmon runs as predicted. However, Southeast Pink Salmon, an important fishery for the Whatcom County purse seine fleet, was lower than predicted. Bristol Bay, where Whatcom County has an estimated 400 gillnet fishermen including crewmembers, had another banner year with a catch of 41 million sockeye. The average weight of a Bristol Bay sockeye this season was at 5.7 pounds up from last year's very small 4.5 pounds per fish.

In general, a total of 194.8 million salmon were harvested from Alaska waters in the 2025 season, an 88% increase from the 2024 total harvest of 103.5 million salmon. The 2025 commercial salmon fishery harvest for all species was valued at approximately \$541 million, a significant increase from \$304 million in the 2024 season. The 2025 statewide ex-vessel average price per pound for all salmon species improved from 2024 values.

Salish Sea:

As for summer salmon fisheries in the Salish Sea, two incredible miscalculations occurred on the Fraser River sockeye and pink salmon returns which adversely affected local fisheries for those highly-important salmon runs.

The Pacific Salmon Commission (PSC), an international body that oversees U.S. and Canadian fisheries on the Fraser River sockeye and pink salmon returns each year, issues predictions on these two runs in the spring of the year. This year the PSC predicted a pink salmon return of 26 million fish, making it one of the largest runs on record. Its prediction on sockeye returning was 3 million fish, a low figure that probably would have precluded any U.S. or Canadian commercial fishing for sockeye. U.S. fisheries on these stocks included tribal gillnet and purse seine and non-tribal gillnet, purse seine and reefnet fishing methods.

Our local tribal and non-tribal fishermen were very excited about the pink prediction. In fact, if this many pinks showed up at their usual timing of late August and early Sept., there was some worry that our limited production capacity on Puget Sound would not be able to process, ship, and store this many fish. However, as the summer progressed it became very evident that nowhere near the predicted amount of pink salmon were showing up in test fisheries. As it turns out, only 12 million fish returned to the Fraser River, and the PSC gave the U.S. fleet only limited time to catch some of these fish. Final totals were 501, 139 fish for non-tribal fishermen and 617,741 fish for tribal fishermen, the majority in both fisheries begin caught by purse seiners.

Now we turn to the sockeye fishery. Instead of 3 million fish showing up, a much larger run of 10 million fish returned to the Fraser River. The PSC fisheries managers were caught off guard and allowed most of these fish to go up the river to spawn. There were plenty of fish available for both U.S. and Canadian fishermen to catch, but PSC didn't open much fishing time for these sockeye. As a result, U.S. fishermen caught only 297,378 fish, the majority being caught by tribal fishermen, some of whom had record catches in just three or four days of fishing.

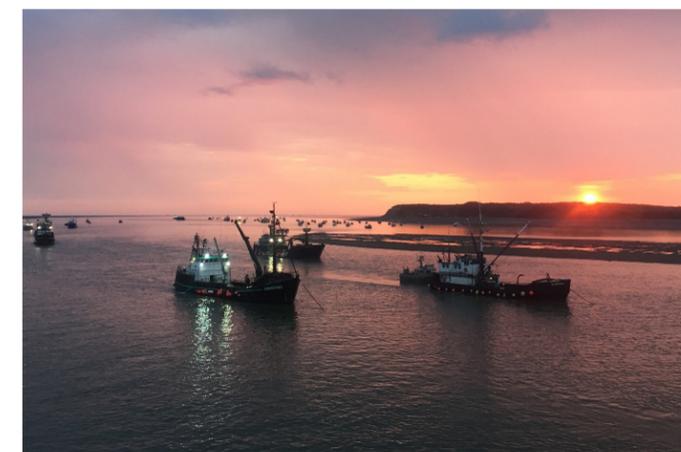
The fall season for coho and chum salmon last year was a real boon to the local fishermen – gillnet, reefnet and purse seine. Much was expected for 2025. However, coho and chum returns, including Fraser River fish, were disappointing and didn't add much to the overall catch.

Continued global market conditions:

All of the factors (smaller-sized fish, processing, tariffs and geopolitical issues), combine to bring added uncertainty to our local commercial fishing families. However, the women and men who work in this sector and harvest our seafood will continue to face these challenges with their usual hard work, grit, resilience, and ingenuity.

Dungeness Crab Fisheries:

So far, the Puget Sound 2025 crab fishery has had a steady year with higher prices paid to tribal and non-tribal fishermen. This includes catches from inside waters and the Washington coast. An added advantage that salmon fishermen don't enjoy is that crabbers land their product alive and it's shipped to domestic and export markets live, thus not needing local processing capacity. The Washington coast has processors in Westport, Ilwaco and points in Oregon that can cook and process the crab catch. The Washington Coast crab fishery is slated to begin on Dec. 30, which would be the earliest in quite a few years.



Sunset in Bristol Bay. Photo: Nate Thomas

Waterfronts work for all.

CONNECT

LEARN

SHARE

Blue DRINKS



Blue Drinks is for anyone involved or interested in Whatcom County's waterways and maritime endeavors. We invite you to join the fun, connect informally, and help build awareness of our waterfronts and our connection to them!

Join Us!

Wednesday, March 18

5:00pm-5:30pm

Drop-In Tour: Shop 38 - 1003 C St

5:30pm-7:00pm

Beach Cat Brewing South Paw

1010 C St

Presented By



Featuring a short presentation by Washington Maritime Blue at 6:00pm on their program:



Make New Friends
Learn about Maritime Endeavors
Create Connections
Share, and Have Fun!

Get Tickets!



**WORKING WATERFRONT COALITION**
OF WHATCOM COUNTY

presents the
8th Annual

Tide to Table

Yacht-Rock Seafood Boil

April 25 | 5:30pm

**Bellingham
Yacht Club**



MARINE TRADES JOB FAIR

Open to the
Public

FREE EVENT

Registration
requested



February 25th, 2026

12pm-4pm

Squalicum Boathouse
2600 Harbor Loop
Bellingham, WA

Veterans have priority entrance at 11:30am

Your next adventure starts here!

Looking to launch your career, explore new trades, or connect with local employers?

This FREE 1-day event is your chance to make it happen!

What to expect:

***Meet face-to-face with waterfront employers & trade professionals**

***Discover career pathways and hands-on opportunities**

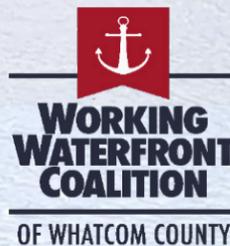
***Build connections that could shape your future**

***Open to all experience levels — from curious beginners to seasoned experts**

Pre-Register



Online today!



A proud partner of the American Job Center network

WorkSource and Northwest Workforce Council are equal opportunity employers/programs. Auxiliary aids and services are available upon request to individuals with disabilities. Washington Relay Service: 711.

This event is supported by U.S. Department of Labor funding. Read more about USDOL grant funding at esd.wa.gov/about-us/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/agency-budget/us-department-labor-usdol-grants.

Interested in working as a crew member on a commercial fishing vessel?

CREW CONNECTIONS MIXER

Are you a boat operator looking for crew members for the upcoming fishing season?



Wed. Feb 25, 2026
5:30 PM - 7:30 PM



Structures Brewing
601 W. Holly St, Bellingham, WA
98225

- Make connections
- Learn about crewing on a commercial boat
- Meet potential crew members
- All ages event



RSVP HERE



Fairhaven clean up clears way for development

By Dan Tucker

The Port of Bellingham is advancing a major environmental cleanup effort in the Fairhaven Marine Industrial Park area that Environmental Planning Director Brian Gouran described as both a necessary reset for the site and a key step toward future maritime job growth.

During a Fairhaven work study report-out to the Port Commission, Gouran explained that the Marine Industrial Properties area (the former Fairhaven shipyard) has been undergoing a significant cleanup and redevelopment planning effort. The site's future now requires a new approach that balances marine industry needs, environmental requirements, and long-term feasibility.

The current phase of cleanup focuses on the upland portion of the property. A drone image Gouran shared showed the site almost entirely excavated, with crews removing a minimum of four feet of contaminated soil across the footprint. In areas with deeper impacts, larger excavations were done to ensure contaminated material was removed.

The project is being completed by a local contractor, Strider Construction. It highlighted an example of cleanup dollars supporting local employment while restoring industrial land for productive use. Upland cleanup alone represents a \$4 million effort. This is only one piece of a larger cleanup plan. Gouran said the Port anticipates a future in-water sediment cleanup phase, potentially costing \$14–20 million, to address contamination in the near-shore area in front of the facility.

As the upland work nears completion, the Port is preparing to begin a “programming” discussion to determine what marine industrial uses best fit the cleaned site, and what infrastructure (such as a travel lift, crane pad, or launch ramp) will be needed to support vessels and marine trades into the future.



Drone footage of the clean up. Photo: Port of Bellingham

...continued from front page “US Operators affected...”

- **U.S.—Flag Whale-Watching Operators**
Foreign-flagged ships have begun anchoring in rich whale-watching areas, like Point Adolphus or Point Retreat, and launching a dozen or more skiffs at a time. This practice directly displaces local operators whose livelihoods depend on these areas.

- **U.S.—Flag Dayboat Charters**
In the past, foreign cruise ships hired U.S. dayboats to provide kayaking and small-boat tours in remote Alaska. As foreign vessels increasingly run these tours themselves using U.S. hulls stored on foreign motherships, this business has nearly disappeared.

- **U.S.—Flag Sportfishing Charters**
Foreign cruise ships can now anchor over productive salmon grounds, deploy U.S.-built fishing skiffs, and keep guests fishing all day. These operations obtain permits via the U.S. hulls they carry, even though they are controlled by foreign vessels.

- **Alaska Shore-Excursion Businesses**
Local whale-watching, kayaking, glacier-tour, and sportfishing companies lose sales when visiting passengers can simply join similar excursions launched from the foreign-flagged ship they arrived on.

As small maritime businesses, we are proud to follow the laws that govern our waters and protect our public lands. But those laws only matter if they are enforced. Our hope is that, by speaking together and raising awareness, we can help restore fairness, support American jobs, and ensure a sustainable future for U.S.-flag operators across Alaska and beyond.

Editor: Want to submit a story from your business/sector? Email us at: Info@whatcomworkingwaterfront.org

Upcoming Coalition Events

Marine Trades Job Fair / Crew Connections 2026

Feb 25, Squalicum Boathouse, 12-4:00 p.m.

Feb 25, Structure's Brewing on Holly, 5:30-8:00 p.m.

Blue Drinks Q1 2026

March 18, Beachcat Brewing South Paw, 5:30 p.m.

(Drop-in tour of Shop 38 just steps away, 5:00 p.m.-5:30 p.m.)

Tide to Table 26

April 25, Bellingham Yacht Club, 5:30p.m.

The Working Waterfront Coalition of Whatcom County does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion (creed), gender, gender expression, age, national origin (ancestry), disability, marital status, sexual orientation, or military status, in any of its activities or operations.

Thank you to our sponsors who help sustain this newsletter:

VIGILANT
counsel for employers

AltaGas

PREMERA | 
BLUE CROSS

ALA Energy

ALA Renewable Energy

SEAVIEW
BOATYARD & YACHT SERVICE
SEATTLE • BELLINGHAM

On the Waterfront published by


WORKING WATERFRONT COALITION
OF WHATCOM COUNTY

info@whatcomworkingwaterfront.org www.whatcomworkingwaterfront.org