

# Help Our Kelp Act

*Sen. Jeff Merkley - OR*

Kelp forests grow predominantly on the Pacific Coast, from Alaska and Canada to the waters of Baja California. While New England isn't known for its kelp forests the way California is, throughout New England, especially in areas with rocky bottoms and wave action, there are lush, rolling meadows of kelp.

Like an underwater rainforest, kelp forest ecosystems provide food and habitat for hundreds of species of fish, invertebrates, and marine mammals. Coastal communities also depend on healthy kelp forest ecosystems to protect coastlines and support sustainable fisheries. Kelp generate a potential value of [\\$465 to \\$562 billion/year worldwide](#) across three key ecosystem services - fisheries production, nutrient cycling, and carbon removal.

However, over the last 50 years, climate change, poor water quality and overfishing have damaged 40% to 60% of kelp forests. From the South Coast of Oregon to the North coast of California, [more than 95% has been lost](#) due to a perfect storm of bad conditions: higher ocean temperatures in recent years have limited kelp growth, and sea star wasting disease removed a key predator of purple sea urchins. The overpopulated urchins are voracious kelp eaters and have created underwater wastelands. Meanwhile, marine heatwaves are [increasing in intensity and frequency](#), making the long-term recovery of kelp forests uncertain.

As a result of their decline, small-scale fisheries, are severely impacted by a lack of food, such as the red abalone fishery, which has closed local businesses and weakened communities. Fewer fish has meant less food for birds, larger fish, and marine mammals. Kelp restoration and urchin removal efforts are underway, but local stakeholders, and state and federal partners need our support. The Help Our Kelp Act is urgently needed to direct federal resources to this cascading challenge.

## **Specifically, the Help Our Kelp Act:**

- Establishes a new NOAA grant program to fund conservation, restoration, and management projects focused on kelp forest ecosystems.
- Focuses on addressing the greatest relative regional declines, long term ecological or socioeconomic resilience, prevention of large scale kelp forest loss, or are in focal recovery areas identified by Tribal, federal or state management plans.
- Authorizes \$5 million per year for FY 2024 through FY 2028.
- Grants open to Indian Tribes, Alaska Native Corporations, tribal organizations, academic researchers, fishing industry, nonprofits, state agencies, and local government.