

## **REPORT OF THE HABITAT STEERING GROUP**

At its meeting on Monday, June 26, the Habitat Steering Group (HSG) received informational presentations on the following projects which have the potential to adversely affect essential fish habitat, particularly for salmon. The HSG has drafted letters on these issues to the appropriate entities for Council consideration.

### **CALFED**

In September 1999, the Council sent a letter to CALFED regarding its Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and provided comments on several sections. The San Francisco Bay-Delta System, its biological components, and the ecological processes supported by this system are part of the essential fish habitat for salmon, groundfish, and coastal pelagic species. CALFED has formed a Policy Group, co-Chaired by the U.S. Department of the Interior and the California Resources Agency. The HSG has drafted a letter for Council approval to the co-Chairs of the Policy Group recommending the rehabilitation of biodiversity and ecological processes of the Bay-Delta system, and urging the Policy Group to incorporate suggested requirements into its programs. The Policy Group is expected to finalize CALFED's Assurances Package and Record of Decision in July.

### **Roadless Area Conservation Proposed Rule and DEIS**

The U.S. Forest Service has released a proposed rule for public comment regarding the protection of roadless areas nationwide. The actions resulting from the proposed rule will affect the essential habitats of coho, chinook, and Puget Sound pink salmon. Remaining areas of salmon spawning habitat that are properly functioning at the watershed level need to be protected, and degraded salmon habitats need to be restored. The current option in the proposed rule would protect roadless areas of 5,000 acres or more which would lead to the eventual loss of many significant habitat areas. Therefore, the HSG has drafted a letter for Council approval recommending the protection of roadless areas greater than 1,000 acres as well as roadless areas smaller than 1,000 acres which are ecologically significant. Comments on the proposed rule are due in August.

### **Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project (ICBEMP)**

ICBEMP has developed the Interior Columbia Basin Supplemental DEIS and sent it out for public review. The Council previously commented on the Upper Columbia Basin DEIS and the Eastside DEIS in October 1997. This project could potentially impact coho and chinook salmon essential fish habitat; other species of concern include steelhead, sockeye salmon, sturgeon, and Pacific lamprey. The current proposed strategy provides few options to reverse broad scale habitat degradation trends and does not implement mainstem corridor survival programs necessary to address serious resource problems that require attention now. The HSG has drafted a letter for Council approval recommending management measures for immediate implementation. Comments on the Supplemental DEIS are due on July 6.

### **Non-Action Items**

The HSG also received informational presentations and updates on the following issues:

### **Fishing Gear Impacts**

The HSG received an update from Ms. Cyreis Schmitt, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), regarding fishing gear impacts. NMFS is currently conducting a habitat survey using a submersible and a remotely operated vehicle (ROV) off Heceta Bank, Oregon; the survey is a repeat of a study which was done 10 years ago in the same area. Other fishing gear projects for the near future include a study to determine the effects of the five-inch roller gear restriction and cooperative gear modification developments.

### **Puget Sound Groundfish Endangered Species Act (ESA) Listings**

NMFS completed its first review of cod, pollock, and hake and distributed a draft report to the affected parties including the tribes, Canada, and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW)—comments from those entities are due around July 10. A biological team of NMFS staff will then forward a preliminary biological opinion to the Northwest Region, NMFS in mid-August for publication in the federal register around the end of October. A biological opinion on the other species petitioned for listing—Pacific herring and brown, copper, and quillback rockfishes—is expected to be in the *Federal Register* by February 2001.

### **Western Oregon Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP)**

The HSG received a presentation from Mr. Ross Holloway, Oregon Department of Forestry, regarding a draft HCP between the Board of Forestry, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and NMFS. In addition to meeting the federal requirements under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the goal of the HCP is to improve the landscape of state forest land with older, more diverse stands. The plan contains management strategies for landscapes, roads, and slope stability and proposes a network of “salmon emphasis areas”—a set of state forest watersheds which are the “best” areas for salmon—with recommended restoration projects. A draft assessment is expected by the end of the year.

### **Proposed Final 4(d) Rule**

The HSG received a presentation from Ms. Rosemary Furfey, NMFS Protected Resources Division, regarding the proposed final ESA 4(d) rule. The rule describes 14 populations of salmon and steelhead—7 evolutionary significant units (ESUs) for salmon and 7 ESUs for steelhead. There are two types of limits to ESA take provisions in the rule—one which incorporates state and local programs which have already been determined by NMFS to be effective in minimizing impacts, and another which develops criteria that a program can meet to get a limit if the jurisdiction elects to work with NMFS. The latter provides opportunities for programs to come within a limit without a rule amendment. The steelhead 4(d) rule will be final 60 days after it is published in the Federal Register (end of August), and the salmon rule will be final 180 days after publication (end of December).

### **Klamath Water Operations Plan 2000**

Despite the June 1, 2000, letter from the Pacific Council to the Secretary of the Interior advocating higher minimum flows for the Klamath River Basin, the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) adopted stream flows which were inadequate. The California Department of Fish and Game has been following this issue closely and has also sent comments to BOR. The adopted flows will result in an adverse modification of critical habitat which is a violation of ESA. Dr. Thomas Hardy developed the first flow recommendations (Hardy Phase I)—which were disregarded by BOR—and is in the process of drafting Hardy Phase II which is expected to be done by the end of August. The HSG will receive an update on this issue in September and will likely have a draft letter for Council approval at the November meeting.

### **San Francisco Airport Expansion**

Federal and state regulatory agencies (NMFS, Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and California Department of Fish and Game) continue to meet monthly with representatives of the Federal Aviation Administration, San Francisco International Airport, and the City of San Francisco. The purposes of these meetings are to review the status of ongoing environmental studies, discuss the list of runway alternatives, identify a process for examining potential habitat mitigation sites, and discuss the progress of setting up a peer review panel. The agencies have formally requested the runway proponents drop Alternative F4 from further consideration as this is the most excessive alternative for bay landfill needs (up to 1,300 acres). Eliminating this alternative from further review also allows a comprehensive assessment of the more realistic alternatives which require less fill. The HSG will continue to follow this issue and will receive another update at the September meeting.

### **Other Discussion**

The HSG reviewed and discussed the Ad-Hoc Marine Reserve Committee Phase I Technical Analysis and the Draft Groundfish Fishery Strategic Plan. The HSG has prepared separate written statements on these items which will be presented to the Council this week. More in-depth comments and suggestions for these documents will be presented to the Council at its September meeting.

### **Council Action:**

1. Approve letter to U.S. Forest Service regarding Roadless Areas Proposed Rule for Council Chair's signature.
2. Approve CALFED letter to Policy Group for Council Chair's signature.
3. Approve letter to Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project on its Supplemental DEIS for Council Chair's signature.

### **Reference Materials:**

1. Draft U.S. Forest Service letter (Supplemental Attachment G.1.b.).
2. Draft CALFED letter (Supplemental Attachment G.1.c.).
3. Draft Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project letter (Supplemental Attachment G.1.d.).

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