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**NOAA DEVELOPS NEW INTERNET TRACKING OF PERMITS
FOR ENDANGERED SALMON SPECIES IN NORTHWEST**
*New Internet System Based on Commerce Secretary Don Evans' Initiative to
Improve Customer Service*

The Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA fisheries) today announced the roll out of a new Internet-based pilot tracking system. The system will allow applicants to easily check on the progress of their permits as they move through the Endangered Species Act consultation process between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) and NOAA fisheries Northwest Region.

"During my recent visit to the Pacific Northwest, I learned of customers' frustration with the permitting process," said Secretary Evans. "My goal is to support the mission and goals of NOAA Fisheries and the Commerce Department, while providing first-rate customer service. This new pilot program is an important step in a department-wide effort to leverage technology to improve customer service and make the permitting process more transparent and accessible."

The Northwest region was selected as a testing area for the tracking system because of an increasing number of permit applications by governments, businesses and private citizens that may have an impact on protected salmon as they build docks or piers, dredge waterways, deal with stream bank erosion, improve or develop marinas or any other activities that may affect salmon habitat. The system is currently available to residents of Washington, Oregon and Idaho.

“Acting on the secretary’s recommendation, we moved quickly to implement this new permit tracking system,” said Donna Darm, acting administrator of NOAA fisheries Northwest Region. “People affected by these consultations want to know where we are in the process. This pilot program should help them keep track of the status of consultations between federal agencies.”

This pilot program is expected to provide faster customer service with less confusion, giving applicants who have Internet access a quick and easy way to check on their permit consultation, including where it is in the process and how long the application might take to complete. Previously, applicants had to contact both the Corps of Engineers and NOAA fisheries to get the information they needed. Using the permit tracking number obtained when they filed their permit with COE, applicants will now be able to find important information such as the date NOAA fisheries first received the permit, its current status, and the anticipated date of completion. This database is also expected to provide NOAA fisheries managers with another tool to better supervise and improve the consultation process.

Section 7 of the ESA requires federal agencies to consult with NOAA fisheries on any action that may affect listed salmon or their critical habitat. The COE authorizes many such actions under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act when dredging or fill permits are required. With the recent listing of several salmon species, whose range includes the most populated and rapidly developing areas of the Pacific Northwest, many of the 404 permit applicants are experiencing the conservation and process requirements of the ESA for the first time.

NOAA fisheries managers will be assessing the pilot system and will provide improvements as necessary to ensure it meets customer needs. The pilot tracking system is envisioned as a component of a larger, nation-wide NOAA fisheries Consultation Tracking System. The pilot project also represents an important foundation on which NOAA fisheries plans to build additional Web applications to support its mission, and to provide constituents with quicker, easier access to information.

The public can access the tracking system via a link off of the Northwest regional Web site: <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/> or directly at <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pcts/>.

NOAA fisheries is an agency of the Commerce Department’s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The agency is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation’s living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat.

For more information about NOAA please visit: <http://www.noaa.gov>