



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

*National Marine Fisheries Service*

*P.O. Box 21668*

*Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668*

February 19, 2008

Lee A. Benson  
District Ranger  
Yakutat Ranger District  
Tongass National Forest  
PO Box 327  
Yakutat, AK 99689-0327

Re: Colorado Road Project, 1950-1

Attn: Barbara Adams

Dear Mr. Benson,

Thank you for your letter requesting comments from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) concerning the 2<sup>nd</sup> Phase of the Colorado Road/Trail Rehabilitation project. This project endeavors to restore natural hydrologic flow to “profuse, small, palustrine stream channels” in the Situk and Lost River watersheds and repair damaged fish passage for access to upland habitat created by the original Colorado Road/Trail construction activities. The completed project will also help to establish fish refuge in the Lost River watershed in the event of a Russell Fiord ice dam overflow that threatens the Situk River watershed and its tributaries. Phase 1 of the project completed in 2006 successfully reconnected 10 of the 11 upper diverted tributaries to the Situk River restoring 250 acres of wetlands and 5 miles of rearing habitat that had been redirected to the Lost River by the Colorado Trail. Phase 2 of the project will reconnect the remaining 20 streams along the “Trail” portion and 40 along the “Road” portion of the Colorado Road system to the Lost River adding fish passage to approximately 42 miles of habitat and divert current stream flows away from the airport drainage system.

Helicopter support will be provided to hand crews working in the trail portion of the system and heavy machinery will be used to breach the lower accessible portions of the road to re-establish original stream channels. One by two meter jute coir “plugs” composed of natural material will be used to close the breaches and gravel substrate from the road and in-stream vegetation cleared from the channels will be used to stabilize the artificial banks.

In the winter of 1998-1999 the Lost River altered course and now flows into the Situk-Ahrnklin estuary as opposed to previously flowing into the Lost River lagoon (Clark et. al., 2003) before emptying into the Gulf of Alaska. Reports indicate that the Situk-Ahrnklin Inlet is one of the oldest and most productive fisheries in the Yakutat region (Woods, 2002). Prior to the Lost River channel reconfiguration and from research of a damming and overflow event at Russell Fiord in 1986 it was proposed that another event would be much larger and the expanded mouth of the new Situk river channel would likely spill into the Lost River watershed (Lorenz, 1994). Alaska Department of Fish and



Game (ADF&G) technical and management reports reveal that separate, distinct salmon runs return to this area as early as mid-June (chinook and sockeye) and may continue into early December (coho) (Woods, 2002; Clark et. al., 2003). Studies further show that some juvenile salmon may spend up to three years in the Situk basin prior to out-migration and that juvenile chinook and sockeye salmon will probably occupy channel edges, backwaters and sloughs if a major glacial induced event does occur (Murphy and Thedinga, 1991). In light of the new Lost River channel and the implications of a radically altered Situk River drainage system from an overflow event this restoration project emphasizes the importance of re-establishing fish passage to previously obstructed habitat that may partially conserve an impacted fishery.

To underscore the importance and diversity of this area's fishery the ADF&G's Anadromous Waters Catalog identifies Lost River as stream number 182-80-10100 with multiple utilized tributaries, including Tawah Creek, 10100-2005, and Ophir Creek, 10100-2005-3022. These streams support runs of coho, pink, and sockeye salmon, including Dolly Varden, cutthroat and steelhead trout. Both the Situk River system, stream number 182-70-10100, and Ahrnklin River system, stream number 182-70-1200, host all 5 species of Pacific salmon, including cutthroat and steelhead trout. Euchalon, an important prey species for salmon is also listed.

Section 305(b) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act requires agencies to consult with NMFS when any activity proposed to be permitted, funded, or undertaken by a federal agency may adversely affect designated Essential Fish Habitat. Pursuant to Section 305(b)(4)(A) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act NMFS recommends the following EFH Conservation Recommendations :

1. Coho salmon are the predominant anadromous spawners in this area normally arriving from late August to late October. Heavy machinery activity used in breaching the road prisms should not occur when spawning salmon are present.
2. Silt curtains should be utilized where bank disturbance may generate unavoidable siltation to protect rearing salmon fry and out-migrating smolt.
3. Conduct annual monitoring surveys of fish presence to document the progress and success/failure of the restoration efforts.

In an email received from Ms. Adams she indicated that although stream hydrology had been successfully restored in Phase 1 of the project, monitoring activities had been curtailed due to budget constraints. The NMFS Community-based Restoration Program provides funding for communities involved in such restoration projects as yours. Their web-link is

[http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/habitat/restoration/funding\\_opportunities/funding.html](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/habitat/restoration/funding_opportunities/funding.html)

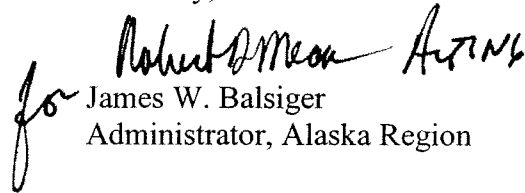
and they offer an Open Rivers Initiative program found at

[http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/habitat/restoration/funding\\_opportunities/funding\\_nwr.html](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/habitat/restoration/funding_opportunities/funding_nwr.html)

for eligible, qualifying applicants conducting similar restoration projects. The NMFS Restoration Center coordinator for the Alaska Region is Erika Ammann who may be reached at (907) 271-5118 or [erika.ammann@noaa.gov](mailto:erika.ammann@noaa.gov) for more details.

Thank you for contacting NMFS for comments and we applaud your efforts in restoring essential fish habitat. If we can be of further assistance please contact Tim Wilkins at (907) 586-7643 or [timothy.wilkins@noaa.gov](mailto:timothy.wilkins@noaa.gov) if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James W. Balsiger". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "J".

James W. Balsiger  
Administrator, Alaska Region

## Literature Cited

- Clark, J. H., D. Reed, and M. Tracy, 2006. Abundance of coho salmon in the Lost River System, Yakutat, Alaska, 2003. Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Fishery Data Series No. 06-11, Anchorage.
- Lorenz, J. M. 1994. Distribution and habitat of adult salmon in the Situk River, Alaska: Potential impacts of flooding from Russell Fiord. U.S. Dep. Commer., NOAA Tech. Memo. NMFS-AFSC-30, 27 p.
- Murphy, M., Thedinga, J., 1991. ABL Scientists Study Glacier's Threat to Yakutat Fisheries. NWAFCSC Quarterly Report, April-May-June, 1991, 5 p.
- Woods, G. F., 2002. Yakutat Set Gillnet Fishery 2002 Management Plan. Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Regional Information Report No. 1J02-22, Anchorage.