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**FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE AND NOAA FISHERIES IMPROVE ESA  
CONSULTATION PROCESS IN SUPPORT OF PRESIDENT'S HEALTHY FORESTS  
INITIATIVE**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and NOAA's Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) today issued new regulations that will accelerate Endangered Species Act review of National Fire Plan (NFP) actions, allowing land managers to better protect communities and wildlife habitat from catastrophic fires.

Under the Endangered Species Act, federal agencies must consult with either FWS or NOAA Fisheries whenever they authorize, fund or carry out an action that may adversely affect a listed species or its designated critical habitat. The regulations issued today will improve the process by allowing trained biologists within these federal agencies to make the initial determination of whether there is likely to be an adverse effect.

This will free up FWS and NOAA Fisheries biologists from routine and often duplicative "informal consultations" and allow them to focus more attention on proposed actions that are more likely to have an effect on listed species. The two agencies will continue the current practice of conducting "formal consultations" in cases where biologists determine a forest health project is likely to have an adverse effect.

FWS, NOAA Fisheries, the National Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the National Parks Service jointly developed the regulations.

"All of these land-management agencies have biologists who have been trained to assess the likely impact of their actions on listed species," said FWS Director Steve Williams. "By issuing these regulations, we are tapping into their expertise and accelerating review of much-needed forest health projects. We will also free up our biologists to address projects that actually have an impact on threatened and endangered species."

“These new regulations will empower resource experts and will help us do a better job protecting our nation’s endangered species,” said NOAA Fisheries Assistant Administrator Bill Hogarth. “NOAA Fisheries will continue to work closely with our federal partners to develop ways of improving processes and to develop ways to fulfill our mission to protect and preserve.”

While the new regulations will accelerate reviews, they do not change any standards used for determining whether an action will have an adverse effect on a listed species. Listed species will receive the same level of protection as before.

The expedited review is critical to restoring forests to health and preventing catastrophic fires. An estimated 190 million acres twice the size of California of federal forests and rangelands in the United States face high risk of catastrophic fire. Years of natural fuels buildup, coupled with drought conditions, insect infestation and disease, make forests and rangelands in many areas throughout the country vulnerable to intense and environmentally destructive fires. Many ponderosa pine forests are 15 times denser than they were a century ago. Where 25 to 35 trees once grew on each acre of forest, now more than 500 trees are crowded together in unhealthy conditions.

The NFP was developed in response to years of these catastrophic wildfires. It is intended to reduce risk to communities and natural resources from wildland fires through rehabilitation, restoration and maintenance of fire-adapted ecosystems, and by the reduction of accumulated fuels or highly combustible fuels within forests, woodlands, grasslands and rangelands.

To further accelerate the implementation of the NFP, President Bush announced the Healthy Forests Initiative in August 2002. The Healthy Forests Initiative builds from the recognition that faster environmental reviews of proposed land-management projects will provide greater benefits to rangelands, forests and wildlife by reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation’s living marine resources and the habitat on which they depend. Through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries’ stewardship of these resources benefits the nation by supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, while helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries, please visit <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System that encompasses nearly 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish

and wildlife agencies.

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