



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

National Marine Fisheries Service
P.O. Box 21668
Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

December 4, 2003

Patricia Wightman
Environmental Coordinator
Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities
2301 Peger Road
Fairbanks, Alaska 99709-5316

Dear Ms. Wightman,

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has reviewed the Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Assessment prepared by the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (ADOT&PF) for rehabilitation of the airport in Tanana. The proposed improvements and expansion will take place on upland areas. The only potential impact to EFH will be the mining of 567,000 cubic yards of gravel from the Yukon River.

The EFH Assessment is well written, although the description of how the gravel will be mined is not clear. The gravel will be extracted from 6 cells on an island in the Yukon River during the winter. Each cell will be mined to an estimated 10 feet below the assumed winter river stage. Mining will start on the furthest downstream cells and work upstream. NMFS interprets the project description to mean that the entire island will be removed and a hole or pit will be left in the bed of the river. This pit will become part of the river channel because it will be deeper than water level of the river, and thus the pit is designed not to become isolated from the river during low water periods and trap fish. If there is any chance the pit could become isolated from the river, NMFS requests that ADOT&PF require the project contractor to dig several connections from the pit to the river channel to avoid fish entrapment.

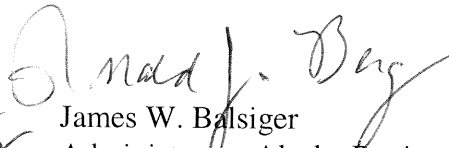
A clear description of the gravel mining protocol may not be possible at this time because ADOT&PF often leaves the mining protocol to the successful bidder for the construction contract. The gravel mining will require permits from the Alaska Department of Natural Resources (ADNR) and the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). NMFS will provide additional recommendations to ADOT&PF, ADNR and USACE to insure that EFH is protected if any deviations are made from the assumed gravel mining protocol described.

NMFS agrees with ADOT&PF's finding that "development of the material source and construction and operations of airport improvements as proposed will have a minimal impact to



EFH.” NMFS looks forward to working with ADOT&PF to minimize project impact to EFH. Please contact Larry Peltz (271-1332) if you have any questions or concerns about this project.

Sincerely,


For James W. Balsiger
Administrator, Alaska Region

cc: Larry Bright U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service - Fairbanks
Robin Willis Alaska Department of Fish and Game - Anchorage
Robert McLean Alaska Department of Natural Resources - Fairbanks