



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

National Marine Fisheries Service

P.O. Box 21668

Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

January 8, 2004

Colonel Timothy J. Gallagher
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
P.O. Box 898
Anchorage, Alaska 99506-0898

Attn: Skip Joy

Dear Colonel Gallagher:

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has reviewed the Public Notice of Application for Permit by William A. Heairet to construct a road and boat ramp on a public easement on the north shore of Big Lake. The applicant proposes to place approximately 365 cubic yards of clean fill and concrete into 0.25 acres of wetlands and other waters of the U.S.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) has determined that the project will not adversely affect Essential Fish Habitat (EFH), including anadromous fish and federally managed fishery resources. NMFS does not agree with this assessment. This project will adversely affect EFH for salmon in the project area. The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) requires NMFS to make conservation recommendations regarding any federal action that would adversely affect EFH. The adverse effects of the proposed project on EFH can be reduced by incorporating the proposed conservation measures into the project permit. NMFS offers the following recommendations pursuant to section 305(b)(4)(A) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act to minimize project impacts.

Background and Discussion

Big Lake is an important anadromous fish system. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game Catalog of Anadromous Fish Streams lists all five species of salmon as occurring in the Big Lake drainage. The Big Lake drainage is the largest producer of sockeye salmon in Northern Cook Inlet and serves as a spawning area and primary nursery lake for most of these sockeye salmon.

Residential and recreational development has increased substantially in the Big Lake area over the last 30 years. The population of Big Lake more than doubled between 1985 (1000) and 2002 (2826). Much of this growth has occurred along the shoreline of Big Lake. This shoreline growth has resulted in a decrease in near shore habitat due to dock installation, recreational use, loss of native plants on the lake shore and surrounding wetland habitat, and changes to drainage patterns from upland development. The near shore habitat in Big Lake provides EFH for sockeye and coho salmon.



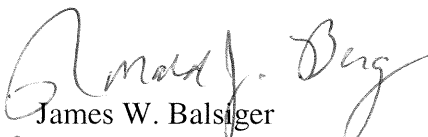
The proposed project will alter the near shore habitat of Big Lake. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated 500 adult sockeye salmon spawning in the project vicinity (Phil Brna, USFWS, personal communication) during one site visit in the fall of 2003. Development of a boat ramp at this location will negatively impact this shoreline spawning bed by putting fill in the lake, changing wetland drainage patterns, and increasing recreational use of the area. The increased recreational use could decrease egg deposition by spawners and resultant fry numbers. Loss of this spawning area and resulting production will negatively impact sockeye salmon production in Big Lake.

EFH Conservation Recommendation

NMFS recommends denial of this permit and suggests the applicant investigate alternative locations for this development. The map provided with the application indicates there are at least four other Right-of-Way easements in close proximity to the proposed project. Development on one of these easements should be explored to determine if there would be less impact on the anadromous fish resources of Big Lake. Finding an acceptable alternative site would preserve the shoreline spawning area near the proposed project and greatly reduce the impact to EFH from increased recreational use.

Please note that under section 305(b)(4) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the Corps is required to respond in writing within 30 days to NMFS recommendations. If the Corps does not make a decision within 30 days of receiving NMFS Conservation Recommendations, the Corps should provide NMFS with a letter to that effect, and indicate when a full response will be provided. Larry Peltz is the NMFS contact for this project, and can be reached at (907) 271-1332.

Sincerely,


For James W. Balsiger
Administrator, Alaska Region

cc: Francis Mann - USFWS Anchorage
Jeff Davis - ADNR Palmer
Robin Willis - ADF&G Anchorage