



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

National Marine Fisheries Service

P.O. Box 21668

Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

February 1, 2006

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

Re: Anchorage Marine Terminal
Redevelopment Environmental
Assessment

Dear Colonel Gallagher:

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has received the Public Notice for the Port of Anchorage Expansion Project (POA-2003-502-N). The completed project would discharge fill material over approximately 135 acres of intertidal and subtidal waters of Upper Cook Inlet. NMFS requests a 30 day extension of the comment period pursuant to Part II (4) of the Section 404(q) Memorandum of Agreement between the Department of Commerce and the Department of Army. NMFS requests this extension for two reasons.

First, NMFS has made efforts since early October to arrange a meeting with MARAD, the Corps, and the applicant to determine whether additional alternatives are practicable to avoid and minimize permanent habitat loss for salmon and to establish a process for developing a suitable mitigation plan. The Corps has scheduled an interagency meeting with the applicant and MARAD for February 9. NMFS needs additional time to evaluate information presented during the interagency meeting.

Second, we require additional time for an environmental review of the potential effects of this permit action on the depleted stock of Cook Inlet beluga whales. NMFS recently released the results of a 2005 aerial stock survey for these whales. That estimate of 278 whales was the lowest of any estimates obtained over the last decade, and indicates the stock may not be responding to management efforts and may not be recovering. The Port of Anchorage expansion would destroy or modify high value beluga habitat, including summer feeding areas. NMFS has worked with the Municipality of Anchorage to investigate beluga whale distribution and habitat use within Knik Arm. The results of this research have been reported monthly, however a close-out report for the 2005-2006 investigations will not be available until later this summer. In the absence of a summary report, we must review the monthly reports and consider the results in the context of the Maritime Administration's environmental assessment and the plans presented in the Public Notice. This analysis will require approximately 30 days, with additional time to complete our response and develop necessary measures to avoid, minimize and mitigate impacts to Cook Inlet beluga whales.



If you have any questions regarding fish resources, please contact Larry Peltz at (907) 271-1332. If you have questions regarding marine mammal issues, please contact Barbara Mahoney at (907)271-1301.

Sincerely,



Robert D. Mecum
Acting Administrator, Alaska Region

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