



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

*National Marine Fisheries Service*

*P.O. Box 21668*

*Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668*

July 2, 2007

Hanh Shaw  
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency  
Region 10  
1200 Sixth Avenue, OWW-130,  
Seattle, WA 98101

RE: Chuitna Coal Project  
Freshwater Aquatic Biology Study Report

Dear Ms. Shaw:

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has reviewed the 2006 Freshwater Aquatic Biology Study Program Report (Report) for the Chuitna Coal Project submitted by PacRim Coal, LP. The report represents a considerable effort to identify the presence of fish species and associated habitat in the proposed mine area.

### **General Comments**

#### Project Description

The Chuitna Coal Project proposes to create a surface coal mine with the potential to remove 700 million metric tons of coal within a 5,050 acre footprint over a 25 year period. In 2006, PacRim provided an Executive Summary of the proposed project to the Alaska Department of Natural Resources that estimated an average yield of one metric ton of coal will be produced for every 5 metric tons of earth removed. Based on that information the mining operation has the potential to displace approximately 3,500 million metric tons of earth. Also, a terrain relief profile in the Report (page 4-32) indicates an approximately 250 foot change in existing surface elevations as a result of mining operations. This change will cross several hydro-logically connected streams.

#### Essential Fish Habitat (EFH)

Under Section 305(b)(2) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act), federal agencies are required to consult with the Secretary of Commerce on any action that may adversely affect Essential Fish Habitat (EFH). EFH has been described for five stocks of Pacific salmon (Chinook, chum, coho, pink and sockeye) within the project area. Additionally, hydrological connections link the mine area with estuarine areas. EFH has been described in these adjacent marine areas for several marine species of ground fish. Many of these groundfish utilize estuarine areas for rearing.

The trigger for EFH consultation is a federal action agency's determination that an action or proposed action, funded, authorized or undertaken by that agency *may adversely affect EFH*. If a federal agency makes such a determination, then EFH consultation is required.

The federal action agency must complete an EFH Assessment as described in 50 CFR 600.920(e), and the level of detail in the EFH Assessment should be commensurate with the



complexity and magnitude of the potential adverse effects of the action. Please visit our website for EFH Consultation Guidance at [www.fakr.noaa.gov/habitat/efh](http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/habitat/efh).

## **Specific Comments**

### Pre-Project Studies

The Report states “the entire area will be returned to the approximate original contour with drainage basins replaced and stream channels restored.” The statement compliments a common watershed restoration goal to restore watershed structure and function to pre-project conditions. The restored condition would account for fish density, species diversity, hydrological linkages, riparian areas, and associated processes. Thus, to fully realize the scope of future water shed and fisheries restoration efforts, several quantitative pre-project studies should be conducted as follows:

- 1) Scientifically defensible population estimates of each fish species including seasonal distribution over several years.
- 2) Identification of associated in-stream spawning, rearing and surrounding riparian habitat that supports the existence of each population in each stream and river reach.
- 3) Hydro-geomorphic profiles that characterize surface and ground water dynamics, surface water sources, and in-stream water flows.
- 4) Seasonal water quality monitoring for tributaries, surface run-off accumulation areas, ground water sources, and estuarine areas connected within the water shed.
- 5) A comprehensive restoration plan that includes a projected time line, restoration cost, and monitoring effort to restore hydro-geologic, hyporeic, riparian areas, and fish populations.

### Summary

NMFS understands that the project is in the early planning and resource information gathering stages. However, it will benefit all concerned if the baseline information collected is useful in analyzing the potential for the proposed project to adversely affect EFH. Additionally, NMFS has not had the opportunity to review the full mine operations plan. A comprehensive mine plan that describes all anticipated phases would be helpful in addressing the impacts of the overall project to all of our trust resources, including EFH. NMFS is also concerned that effects to our trust resources and the watershed may extend beyond the scope of planned remediation efforts. Therefore, we suggest that the potential risk and impacts be evaluated, should the mine be abandoned due to unforeseen circumstance, or restoration commitments cease prior to full project completion.

We look forward to working with you to address the issues discussed above to minimize the effects of this project on living marine resources, including EFH. If you have any questions regarding our comments please contact Doug Limpinsel at (907) 271-6379, or at [doug.limpinsel@noaa.gov](mailto:doug.limpinsel@noaa.gov).

Sincerely,



Robert D. Mecum,  
Acting Administrator, Alaska Region

cc: NOAA/AKR/Records  
EPA - [Shaw.Hanh@epamail.epa.gov](mailto:Shaw.Hanh@epamail.epa.gov)  
USFWS - [phil\\_brna@fws.gov](mailto:phil_brna@fws.gov)  
ADFG - [mark.fink@alaska.gov](mailto:mark.fink@alaska.gov)