



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

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

September 18, 2008

Colonel Kevin J. Wilson
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
P.O. Box 6898
Anchorage, Alaska 99506-0898

Re: Anchorage Harbor Dredging Project
Environmental Assessment

ATTN: Lisa Rabbe

Dear Colonel Wilson:

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has reviewed the Environmental Assessment (EA) and Finding of No Significant Impact from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) to modify the existing annual dredging of the navigation channels in Anchorage Harbor adjacent to the Port of Anchorage (POA). The proposed project would increase the depth that the Anchorage Harbor is dredged from 35 feet below mean lower low water (MLLW) to 45 feet below MLLW for a distance of 10,860 feet and expand the dredge tailing disposal site. The stated purpose of the proposed project is to support the expanded POA facilities, a separate project being constructed by the POA and the Maritime Administration.

Deepening work is scheduled for 2009 through 2012. Operations/maintenance work would be indefinite or as long as the Corps is authorized to maintain the harbor depths. Construction techniques include using both mechanical and hydraulic dredging, and will take place between May and October. The current in-water disposal site, south of Cairn Point, will be expanded (~ 3 times the current footprint) to the north.

The Corps has concluded that the proposed dredging and disposal activity will not produce significant environmental effects. According to the EA, the dredge material is non-toxic and consists of a mix of fine and coarse materials. It is anticipated that added turbidity during dredging and discharge will be minimal due to the natural high turbidity in upper Cook Inlet, as well as relatively strong tidal currents which rapidly suspend and disperse discharged material. Upland disposal of dredge material is not considered feasible due to a lack of suitable disposal sites, higher costs, and unsuitable nature and lack of demand for use as fill for area projects.

NMFS appreciates the Corps coordinating the proposed project with us and offers the following comments and recommendations.

Marine Mammals

Marine mammals are currently protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). In Upper Cook Inlet, beluga whales and harbor seals are the most common species, of which,



belugas are the most frequently sighted marine mammal in the project area. Cook Inlet beluga whales are considered “depleted” under the MMPA, and have been proposed for listing as “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act.

In 2005, in accordance with the MMPA, NMFS published a Draft Conservation Plan for the Cook Inlet Beluga Whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*), in which we divided Cook Inlet into four valuable habitat types. As correctly stated in the EA, this project currently falls within Cook Inlet beluga whale Valuable Habitat Type 2. Since the publication of the Draft Conservation Plan, NMFS has been reconsidering the habitat type boundaries, and should our new delineations be adopted, the project footprint will fall wholly within Type 1 habitat. However, regardless of the habitat type classification (Type 1 vs. Type 2), the impacts of the proposed actions will have the same effects on Cook Inlet beluga whales in the area.

NMFS recognizes the efforts by the Corps to minimize effects on beluga whales, namely by 1) stopping dredging activities if belugas are present within the boundaries of the dredging operation until the belugas disperse; and 2) moving the barge to an area away from the whales (but still within the approved disposal site) if belugas whales are in the vicinity of the disposal site. However, NMFS recommends that the Corps prohibits the disposal of dredge materials at any time a marine mammal is observed within 200 meters of the disposal barge.

Furthermore, while acoustic studies have been conducted in Cook Inlet near the POA to analyze noise produced from clamshell dredging (the method currently employed by the Corps), NMFS requests that prior to implementing a different dredging method (e.g., a hydraulic excavator or a cutter-head dredge) the Corps conducts acoustic studies in Cook Inlet to characterize the noise signature of the new methodology, and provides the results to NMFS for review and comment.

Essential Fish Habitat

Section 305(b) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act requires federal agencies to consult with NMFS on all actions that may adversely affect Essential Fish Habitat (EFH). NMFS is required to make EFH Conservation Recommendations, which may include measures to avoid, minimize, mitigate or otherwise offset adverse effects. The project area is EFH for Pacific cod, sculpin, walleye Pollock, eulachon, and all five species of Pacific salmon. Increased sediment concentrations and turbidity at the surface could adversely affect the ability of juvenile fish, particularly salmon, to feed on surface and near surface prey.

In accordance with Section 305(b)(4)(A) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, NMFS makes the following EFH Conservation Recommendations:

1. As stated in the EA (page 15); dredging contractors should be required to discharge excess water and dredge materials beneath the surface to avoid increasing turbidity.
2. As stated in the EA (page 15) surface water parameters should be monitored down-current of dredge and disposal operations to determine whether surface turbidity increases during project operations. Should an increase be detected, the applicant should consult with resource agencies to modify operations to protect juvenile fish feeding in the effected waters.

In addition, NMFS realizes all the material is not suitable for all uses however, we encourage the Corps to continue investigating possible beneficial uses that could possibly reduce the discharge of material.

Under section 305(b)(4)(B) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act the Corps is required to respond to NMFS EFH Conservation Recommendations in writing within 30 days. If the Corps will not make a decision within 30 days the Corps should provide NMFS with a letter within 30 days to that effect and indicate when a full response will be provided.

If you have any questions regarding our EFH recommendations for this project, please contact Brian Lance at 907-271-1301 or brian.lance@noaa.gov; for questions regarding marine mammals please contact Mandy Migura at 907-271-1332 or mandy.migura@noaa.gov.

Sincerely,



Robert D. Mecum
Acting Administrator, Alaska Region

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