

November 15, 2004

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Re: Places of Refuge Project

Dear Ms. Williams,

The National Wildlife Federation is the nation's largest conservation organization, with over three million members and supporters nationwide, including over 5000 in Alaska. I work at NWF's Anchorage office and manage our Prince William Sound project, which is designed to protect the fish and wildlife resources and wilderness character of the Sound while fostering sustainable economic growth in the region.

We learned of the Places of Refuge (POR) project only recently and have not been directly involved to date. We support the project's goal of minimizing environmental harm resulting from a stricken and/or leaking vessel by identifying areas where such vessels can be taken for stabilization and repair, and where pollution containment efforts can be more effective. Because we have not been directly involved thus far, these comments are based on an incomplete understanding of the process, but I hope they nonetheless can spur constructive dialogue as the project moves forward.

- The POR process should prioritize sensitive sites in PWS.

Much has been done to identify and characterize biologically important areas within the Sound. NWF, Audubon Society, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the University of Alaska Marine Advisory Program hosted a workshop attended by about thirty active researchers and scientists in the Sound that resulted in a report called *Prince William Sound Biological Hotspots* report. This report identifies and describes fourteen biologically crucial areas in the Sound. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has also published PWS maps depicting environmentally sensitive areas for use in developing the GRS sites, as I am sure you know. What we would like to see the POR process do is prioritize key areas as sensitive, more sensitive, and most sensitive, or something along those lines, and not treat all sensitive areas as equal. Additionally, while biological sensitivity is a critical component of identifying appropriate places of refuge, other factors such as recreational value or cultural impact should be included in a "prioritization matrix" as well.

- The POR process should result in a "default" plan that reflects the prioritization of sensitive sites.

Currently, the plan appears to leave the decision regarding which POR site to actually choose until a vessel incident occurs. The plan would pre-select POR sites to choose from, but as discussed above would not prioritize those sites for sensitivity. Instead, the prioritization is expected to occur via consultation within the Unified Command as part of the response to the incident. This is problematic because in the heightened activity and pressure of a real-life oil or hazardous substance spill, there may not be time to consult with the many stakeholders and knowledgeable parties regarding the most appropriate choice. Moreover, even if there is time to gather this input, it may not be consistent, or based on application of consistent criteria. Instead, insights are likely to reflect the perspectives and missions of the various agencies and stakeholders.

A better alternative would be to craft a plan in advance that incorporates this type of input as best as possible. The plan would establish basic guidelines that, in the absence of information or circumstances dictating a different action, would govern the choice of appropriate PORs in different scenarios. The plan would classify PORs as more, less, and least desirable to use under identified, predictable circumstances rather than leaving this hierarchy to be determined at the time of a spill.

To be sure, such a plan would need to account for seasonal changes in sensitivity for many PORs and other factors that could produce different “default” decisions for different scenarios. But those are the same challenges that will confront the decision maker at the time of the incident under the current approach. By working through these questions to craft a more detailed “default” plan, we can improve the chances of minimizing resource damage. Again, the decision maker could deviate from the default plan due to real time information that suggests a better alternative, but it seems more prudent to plan ahead to the greatest extent possible, and not rely on gathering all necessary information and making a reasoned choice in the chaos of a crisis.

- Localized resource information is needed for PORs.

I am unfamiliar with the extent to which the project has developed small-scale, localized information for each POR, but note that resource information would need to be fairly specific and robust to permit an evaluation sufficient to support a reasoned choice among alternatives for minimizing resource damage.

- GRS plans for PORs may need modification.

Unless the GRS plan for a POR already anticipates the arrival of a large leaking vessel within the GRS site (as opposed to an oil slick or other substance approaching from outside the site), the GRS plan will need to be updated to reflect this possibility. Questions such as exactly where a leaking vessel should be taken within the POR site so as to maximize stabilization, repair, or lightering efforts while minimizing resource damage should be answered through the POR process and reflected in relevant GRS plans.

Again, we appreciate your effort on the POR process and look forward to discussing this project with you further. Please contact me with any questions or comments you may have.

Sincerely,

Patrick Lavin  
Prince William Sound Project Manager  
National Wildlife Federation  
750 W. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave., Suite 200  
(907) 339-3909

c: Mark Fink, ADFG  
Steve Zemke, USFS