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MEMORANDUM

To: National Fish Habitat Board

From: Staff

Date: December 30, 2011

Subject: Recommendations for Board action on the Pacific Marine & Estuarine Fish Habitat Partnership application

On March 3, 2010, the National Fish Habitat Board (Board) approved a process for recognizing Fish Habitat Partnerships (FHPs) in 2010 and beyond, following the initial 3-year schedule of FHP applications that spanned 2007-2009. The process requires prospective FHPs to meet the criteria in the *Policies and Guidance for Fish Habitat Partnerships*, last amended by the Board on October 8, 2008.

The Pacific Marine and Estuarine Fish Habitat Partnership (PMEP) submitted an application for recognition by the Board on November 12, 2011, in accordance with the Board's process for recognizing FHPs.

The staff provides the following recommendations for the Board's January 12, 2012 teleconference meeting:

1. ***The Board should approve the application of the PMEP as a Fish Habitat Partnership, in that the PMEP has demonstrated through its application that it meets the criteria in the Policies and Guidance for Fish Habitat Partnerships.***
2. ***The Board's response to the PMEP application should provide the following guidance:***
   a. ***While the geographic scale of the PMEP is appropriate to address regional fish habitat issues, in view of the complexity of Pacific coast habitats, the Board commends the PMEP for its statement (on page 14 of the draft strategic plan) that the geographic extent of the PMEP could be revisited in the future if circumstances warrant.***
   b. ***The PMEP is strongly encouraged to coordinate with the Science & Data Committee to ensure that PMEP habitat assessments are compatible with the National Fish Habitat Assessment, and that its data systems are compatible with the National Data System.***

c. ***The PMEP should initiate communication with neighboring governments in Canada and Mexico to alert them to the formation of the PMEP, laying the groundwork for potential future collaboration.***
d. ***The PMEP should continue to coordinate with other FHPs that have similar, overlapping, or complementary interests. These include the Western Native Trout Initiative, North American Salmon Stronghold Partnership, several FHPs in Alaska, and especially the California Fish Passage Forum. Coordination is a two-way process, and these FHPs are expected to reciprocate the relationship.***
e. ***The PMEP strategic plan should more fully explain the "suite of ecological services that benefit people" mentioned on page 4 of the draft strategic plan, and more fully identify the social, cultural, and economic benefits that estuarine and marine habitats provide. A partial explanation appears in the introduction of the draft strategic plan (page 5), but a more complete description would help to promote the PMEP and its vision to a wider audience, and to gain more public support and engagement in fish habitat conservation. A brief mention of "maintaining working waterfronts and landscapes" (page 22) could be expanded upon to capture the role of humans in PMEP's vision for these habitats.***
f. ***The PMEP strategic plan should expand on the statement on page 15 that the "Pacific coast estuary and nearshore marine environments are nationally significant", with reference to the large human population in the PMEP area, and the importance of these habitats to people, e.g. for sport and commercial fishing.***
g. ***The PMEP strategic plan should more fully develop the linkages between PMEP's strategic priorities and conservation action, and conservation metrics that PMEP will use to measure progress. In the draft strategic plan these linkages are vague to non-existent. The PMEP should ensure that its final strategic plan addresses these gaps.***
h. ***The PMEP strategic plan should acknowledge that the National Fish Habitat Partnership (hence PMEP) promotes <u>voluntary, non-regulatory</u> approaches to conservation. Non-traditional conservation partners (e.g. landowners, businesses, and local communities) should be targeted for involvement in PMEP's efforts, not necessarily at the Steering Committee level, but certainly at the project level. Currently the draft strategic plan does not mention these key elements of the NFHP.***

Following are excerpts from the PMEP application and draft strategic plan.

The PMEP organized in recognition of the importance of estuaries and nearshore habitats to fish, and to focus action on key threats and stressors on these systems. Estuaries and nearshore habitats are among the world's most productive ecosystems, providing social, ecological, cultural and economic benefits as well as a full array of ecosystem services. Nearshore marine environments have consistently higher species diversity, density, and production than deeper water marine habitats. Estuaries are important spawning grounds and nurseries for two-thirds of the nation's commercial fish and shellfish.

The PMEP will convene government and like-minded partners to leverage and coordinate programs and funding towards common priorities – fish habitat, habitat connectivity, and water quality and quantity. By working together, partners in the PMEP will consolidate existing knowledge to develop science-based conservation priorities and leverage existing programs of member organizations to act on those priorities and achieve on-the ground results.

After an analysis of region-wide needs, gaps, and partner interests, the PMEP selected priority areas for its conservation efforts. The PMEP will protect, restore, and enhance:

- ***juvenile fish habitat*** in nearshore marine and estuary habitats;
- ***tidal wetland-intertidal-subtidal-nearshore connectivity***; and
- ***water quality and quantity*** in estuaries and nearshore marine environments.

The PMEP steering committee currently includes six state agencies, the PSMFC (representing five western states), two federal agencies, four non-governmental organizations, two tribal representatives, and one public/private entity, the Pacific Coast Joint Venture. These entities comprise a community of interest dedicated to the protection, enhancement, and restoration of key habitats within Pacific estuaries and nearshore marine environments. The steering committee has adopted operating rules and by-laws, including a clear decision-making protocol.

The PMEP boundary encompasses all marine and estuarine tidal and subtidal waters of the states of California, Oregon, and Washington, from the three nautical mile boundary of the territorial sea landward to the high tide line, including the upstream extent of saltwater intrusion into coastal river systems. It also includes adjacent shorelands and marine riparian areas that provide inputs to these waters (e.g., filtration and storage of stormwater, large wood, nutrients, and sediment supply). The land/water area including offshore islands and major bays and estuaries is 173,776 square miles. The aquatic area offshore out to the 200m depth line, including all bay/estuary areas is an additional 42,634 square miles. The total of the above areas combined is 216,410 square miles.

The PMEP has developed a draft strategic framework and intends to finalize it by July 1, 2012. The strategic framework is guided by the integration of NFHP strategies with existing key documents from partner organizations (i.e., nearshore strategies, state wildlife action plans, assessments of estuarine and nearshore marine habitats) to articulate key stressors within the geographic scope of the PMEP.

The PMEP will use existing national and state data for assessing fish habitat and needed work, and will communicate information needs and gaps through partners. The PMEP's Science and Data Committee (in communication with the Board's science and data committee) will help ensure assessments link to the national framework for assessing fish habitat. Science and data resources currently available to the PMEP include:

- The Nature Conservancy's ecoregional assessments
- The Nature Conservancy's estuary assessment

- The Pacific Fishery Management Council Essential Fish Habitat Designation documents
- The National Estuary Program Coastal Condition Report
- Washington's *Developing Indicators and Targets for Eelgrass in Puget Sound*
- Ducks Unlimited/Pacific Coast Joint Venture project on the impacts of sea level rise in Oregon and Washington
- Puget Sound Nearshore Ecosystem Restoration Project data.