

Policy News from ESA's Public Affairs Office

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WA State Enters Landmark Habitat Conservation Plan

Policy News from ESA's Public Affairs, 6/16/06. The Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service agreed to shield loggers and forest landowners from parts of the Endangered Species Act for 50 years if they follow the state of Washington's new rules protecting salmon. The sweeping deal is one of the biggest programs of its kind in the nation. The "Forests and Fish" Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) covers 9.3 million acres of mostly private forests, encompassing just over 20 percent of the state, making it second only to the red-cockaded woodpecker HCP on private timberlands in Georgia. The Forests and Fish plan attempts to provide protections for salmon mainly by establishing stream buffers and requiring road maintenance. Under the plan, many private landowners will have to leave 100-foot wide forested buffers along streams bearing fish and 50-foot buffers along ones that do not. Additionally, timberland owners will have to reduce the amount of sediment from roads flowing into salmon streams, install fish culverts underneath roads to provide access to historic habitat and, in some cases, abandon unneeded roads so habitat can return to a more natural state.

But some say the plan falls short by giving landowners who own less than 20 acres exemptions from stream buffers.

"As much as 35 percent of the salmon-bearing streams subject to harvest in some watersheds could be affected by the exemption," said Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission Chairman Billy Frank Jr. "The tribes believe that the small landowner exemption will result in an unacceptable loss of fish."

Two reviews of the plan, one by Washington and one by two science societies, faulted it for not taking all environmental impacts into consideration. A group of 28 scientists wrote to then-Gov. Gary Locke (D) saying that the plan had a "low probability of achieving its goals" of saving salmon.