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TO: Salmon Recovery Funding Board Members and Designees
FROM: Steve Leider, Review Panel Team Leader 
SUBJECT: REVIEW PANEL OBSERVATIONS ON THE 2006 (7TH) GRANT ROUND REVIEW PROCESS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

On behalf of the 2006 (7th) grant round Review Panel (panel) I am pleased to provide you with a summary of the panel's observations and recommendations. We hope these recommendations will be of value as you consider potential improvements to upcoming grant rounds.

Panel comments and recommendations are organized in four categories: (I) regional process overviews, ratings and narratives, (II) review process, (III) projects, and (IV) general.

I. Comments on regional process overviews, ratings of strategies and fit of lists

- **Utility of Review Panel ratings and other comments** – Compared to past grant rounds the Review Panel felt that the value of its comments and ratings to the lead entities and perhaps the Salmon Recovery Funding Board (SRFB) was lessened, since strategies and plans in most cases were not reviewed and the availability of funds for projects was more certain as a result of the transition to target regional pre-allocations, coupled with the reconciliation of project lists between the lead entities and regional recovery plan needs. The panel recognizes however, that their reviews may be of some value to help ascertain how well the SRFB's overall process worked.

Recommendation: *For future grant rounds, the SRFB should revisit whether or not they want reviews of plans and/or strategies. If not, perhaps staff review and comments regarding completeness would be appropriate. In addition, the SRFB should determine whether comments on processes need to be performed by an independent group like the Review Panel, or whether some or all of those services could be adequately performed by SRFB staff (perhaps on the behalf of and guided by the panel).*



- **Information quality** – Review Panel overviews of regional processes are dependent on the completeness and accuracy of Regional Technical Team (RTT) or Technical Recovery Team (TRT) information that is provided to the panel by regional organizations and lead entities via the application process (including ensuing presentations to the panel). To the extent that information submitted to the panel is incorrect or contains misunderstandings made by the RTT/TRT, the panel's conclusions can be misinformed, unless the situation is rectified for the panel, preferably by the information source itself. Although only one occurrence this grant round was experienced, the panel feels that the potential for and seriousness of the risks necessitate elevating the prospect for attention and resolution.

Recommendation: *The SRFB Policy Manual, information submission process, and staff outreach to lead entities and regional organizations should require that errors and misunderstandings in submitted RTT/TRT documentation are noted, and acknowledged in writing preferably by the originating technical body at the time applications are submitted.*

II. Review process

- **Pre-application workshops** – Various lead entities and regional organizations convened early workshops or meetings at which priorities in strategies or recovery plans were discussed and potential interests of project sponsors were discussed in the context of the highest priority implementation needs. The Review Panel was invited to participate in a few of these sessions, and although they could be time-consuming for the panel, found them to be useful for all as local groups strive to develop even better projects and submit to the SRFB increasingly strategic project lists.

Recommendation: *Pre-application workshops should be mandatory as a key step in the development of projects/lists, to clarify strategic needs and exchange project details, to benefit project sponsors, lead entities, and regional organizations, and the Review Panel if invited. Regional organizations should be encouraged to seek Review Panel participation.*

- **Timing** – The timing of the review process this year was compressed in various ways, providing some advantages and some disadvantages. An artifact of the timeline was that the span of time between the Review Panel's meeting to identify potential projects of concern (PPOCs) (on a Thursday-Friday) and subsequent start of meetings with lead entities and regional organizations to discuss POCs and other matters was the following Monday. This hampered the effectiveness of Review Panel meetings with regional organizations, lead entities, and project sponsors.

Recommendation: *The schedules for future grant rounds should afford sufficient time for preparation by participants presenting information to the Review Panel. Timing should allow sufficient time for presenters to develop and submit to the panel clarifying information and documentation of any needed adjustments to previously submitted application materials.*

- **Ongoing technical consultation** – During the review process at least one lead entity requested ongoing technical consultation from the Review Panel to help develop and refine project design elements and specifications, outside of the annual project review process.

Recommendation: *The SRFB should address whether or not to fund Review Panel capacity to provide ongoing technical consultation services from the panel, and if so, what level of such effort would be appropriate and when.*

- **Habitat implementation plans or work schedules** – the concept of habitat implementation plans or work schedule tools remains attractive to the Review Panel. Such tools potentially would allow developed project lists and their implementation to span multiple grant rounds. These tools are expected to be increasingly available for use in the next grant round. The extent to which these tools are or will be undergoing independent technical review is unclear, what the documentation of any such reviews would be, or how those reviews will have influenced the implementation schedules that are used as the basis for project lists.

Recommendation: *For the next grant round the SRFB should understand the extent to which habitat implementation plans or work schedules would be developed and applied. Further, the extent to which they have been reviewed for consistency with strategies and recovery plans, independent from review by lead entities and regional organizations, will help the SRFB determine if additional review would be appropriate (e.g., by the SRFB Review Panel or others).*

III. Projects

- **Novel project types** – This year the Review Panel reviewed a project (San Juan Protection Initiative) that was of a type that had not been evaluated in past grant rounds. The project technical evaluation criteria available to the panel did not fit this type of project very well, and thus the panel spent inordinate amounts of time reviewing materials and discussing the project with sponsors, the submitting lead entity, and amongst themselves to address concerns. It seems reasonable to expect that if the project were successful in San Juan County, the need for similar efforts would be appropriate across the rest of the Puget Sound region and across the state.

Recommendation: *To the extent that similar projects are likely to be submitted in the future, the Review Panel urges the SRFB to consider review and revision of benefit and certainty criteria to better accommodate projects of this type. Further, the SRFB may want to consider the San Juan project to be a pilot study. Prior to considering funding of similar projects elsewhere, the SRFB could review results from the pilot study to ensure that it demonstrates certainty of success and leads to projects.*

- **Information content in applications** – It is not unusual for the Review Panel to spend considerable amounts of time deliberating over some restoration or protection projects because the applications, and occasionally supplemental materials, do not provide enough technical conceptual design information for the panel to review.

Recommendation: *In consultation with the Review Panel, SRFB staff should emphasize criteria and guidance for inclusion in the SRFB Policy Manual clarifying the basic minimum conceptual and technical design information that the panel needs for reviews to be effective and efficient for all.*

- **“Conditioning” of projects** – In 2006 and previous grant rounds, the Review Panel wrestled with ways to bring to the attention of project sponsors, the SRFB, and SRFB staff, projects having some merit but also having some concerns. In the processes to date, these projects would remain POCs unless addressable issues are resolved. This has had the effect of increasing the number of POCs for attention early in each grant round. In retrospect, if these projects had not been delineated by the panel as POCs, it has been unclear whether or not needed improvements will actually be made. Again, in such cases, the tendency of the Review Panel has often been to simply identify those projects as POCs, thus drawing attention to the need for response. Alternatively, this year the panel identified some projects with a “Conditioned” designation. In those cases, if commitments to the conditions identified by the panel were provided in writing, then the panel did not designate the projects as POCs. Importantly, the panel presumed that SRFB staff would ensure that the conditions were met as the project potentially moved toward contracting.

Recommendation: *The Review Panel recommends continued use of project “conditioning” as appropriate, for both POC and non-POC projects. The panel also recognizes a difficulty with this approach, whereby the panel may end up inadvertently taking a larger role in project development than would be desired by the SRFB.*

- **New “insufficient information” category** – The Review Panel has consistently encountered projects that appear to have merit but for some reason, insufficient information was provided in application materials for the panel to fully evaluate benefits and certainty. In these cases simply receiving additional information from the lead entity or project sponsor clarified the project enough to avoid potential POC designations. It would be most efficient for all involved if the panel had sufficient information for emphasis to be placed on the most substantive technical issues associated with POCs.

Recommendation: *It would increase the efficiency of interactions between the Review Panel, project sponsors, and lead entities if the panel were to designate a subcategory of preliminary POCs (PPOCs) as such primarily because of the inadequacy of information available to the panel at the earliest stages of the review process. Distinguishing such PPOCs from the other PPOCs should help expedite resolution of simple information needs, and allow more attention on the PPOC determinations having the most substantive concerns.*

- **Improve guidelines and benefit/certainty criteria for project categories** – Each year the Review Panel reviews projects for which application of the benefit and certainty criteria is awkward. These projects may indeed have some benefits to fish, but that fundamentally have greater non-biological benefits. Bank protection is a good example where some fish-friendly features (e.g., large wood) can be involved (thus making the project eligible for SRFB funding), but that fundamentally attends to non-fish issues.

Recommendation: *The SRFB staff should review and improve project guidelines and criteria to help orient lead entities and project sponsors, and aid evaluation by the Review Panel. For example, panel review and evaluation would benefit from further clarification of Evaluation Criterion #13 ("if the project's main focus is to support other needs such as... property protection or water supply"). Criteria could be revised to simply state that bank protection projects are ineligible unless sediment source control at that particular location is a top priority in the lead entity strategy or recovery plan. Likewise, water supply projects should only be identified for SRFB funding if the resulting savings of water will actually increase instream flow in downstream salmon habitat where low flow is identified as a top priority in a strategy or plan, through water right trading or some other quantifiable basis. Criteria should stress that projects should restore natural processes unless significant infrastructural or political constraints preclude such long-term restoration.*

- **Partial fish passage barriers** – the benefits from projects addressing partial barriers can be relatively low even when analyses based on formal fish passage criteria indicate a fish passage problem exists. Moreover, projects can be submitted to address partial barriers in cases when state passage criteria are met.

Recommendation: *The SRFB and staff should consider what the best approach is to address partial barriers in the context of formal passage criteria. More specific project evaluation criteria for partial barriers could be developed that require project sponsors to document that partial barriers are significant hindrances at a critical migration time(s), or that juvenile seeding of upstream habitat is significantly affected by the existence of the barriers.*

IV. General

- **Eligibility of projects in protected areas** – At least one project reviewed by the Review Panel this year was in an area protected by existing mechanisms (i.e., Habitat Conservation Plan). Confusion exists about the eligibility of such projects.

Recommendation: *The SRFB should clarify its policy regarding the eligibility of projects for funding when those projects are otherwise covered or exist in protected areas encompassed by HCPs.*

- **Assessments** – Data gaps amenable to assessments (and research, but also note the next bullet) are often identified in lead entity strategies and recovery plans. It is typically not clear however, how much more assessment is needed in the context of a recovery plan or lead entity strategy. Further, information typically is not submitted

describing how much assessment work has already been done, how much is 'enough' for SRFB purposes, and what kinds of assessment work would best support different project types.

Recommendation: *The SRFB should clarify the extent to which a retrospective "assessment of assessments" would assist the SRFB understand these issues. This should lead to improved guidance to lead entities and the panel on remaining assessment needs. The SRFB should use more specific criteria and guidelines for assessments so that they focus on diagnosing the cause of problems, rather than evaluating current conditions or trends.*

- **Research projects** – Some projects were deemed by the Review Panel to be good "research" projects, aimed at filling information gaps identified in strategies or plans. These research projects have been eligible for SRFB funding to the extent that overall, the projects include components that would directly lead to on-the-ground projects. The panel has evaluated the POC status of these projects based on SRFB benefit and certainty criteria associated with how well the projects are likely to need lead to protection and restoration projects. It is not clear to what extent the SRFB would like to fund what are fundamentally research projects, even if they are consistent with recovery plans or strategies. Further it is not clear whether and if the SRFB would like them to be flagged as such for SRFB consideration.

There are two important factors for the SRFB to include in their consideration of this issue. These are when: (1) addressing data gaps is a top priority in a strategy or plan, yet SRFB evaluation criteria and funding appear to emphasize restoration and protection projects, and (2) projects including research components appear to provide only modest improvements to scientific understanding. In general, the Review Panel feels there are research questions associated with submitted projects that would be better addressed by larger scale, longer-term efforts. Those larger, longer-term research projects would likely be beyond the scope of SRFB funding alone.

Recommendation: *The SRFB should clarify the extent to which it wants to fund research projects, or whether it wants to adjust benefit and certainty criteria to better address research projects, and whether and how it would like research projects to be identified in application materials and by the Review Panel.*