

Agencies Streamline Permit Process

by Doug Zimmer



Attendees at a streamlining workshop listen as Congressman Brian Baird (in suit) makes a point. To his right is Ken Berg, Manager of the FWS Western Washington Fish and Wildlife Office, and on his left Steve Landino, NOAA Fisheries Director for Washington.

Photo courtesy Dena Horton, Representative Baird's staff

“I came here expecting to complain about problems. But after listening to what you’ve done and what you’re planning to do next, I’m disappointed to say that I can’t find anything to complain about.”

The speaker, an experienced county commissioner concerned about what many of his constituents call “unwarranted government interference in our lives,” was addressing a public meeting hosted by Washington Congressman Brian Baird to look into complaints about federal environmental permitting.

Since the listing of several salmon species and the bull trout in 1998, requests for Endangered Species Act (ESA) section 7 consultations and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Clean Water Act permits in western Washington state have increased dramatically. With limited staff and budget resources, federal and state agencies struggled against a growing backlog of consultation and permit requests.

Then, in April of 2001, Congressman Baird called the agencies and his constituents to the table to find ways to resolve the issue. In a day-long marathon beginning on the banks of the Columbia River and ending halfway to Puget Sound, Baird chaired three meetings to let the agencies and the public talk about the permits issue and the problems each faced. Baird said he called the meetings because “I thought it was important for people from around the district to be able to interact with the state and federal agency representatives.”

Congressman Baird followed up with a second road trip of meetings a year later and a third in July of 2003. Participating agencies included the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; NOAA

Fisheries (the U.S. Department of Commerce agency that has primary jurisdiction under the ESA for most marine species); U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Seattle and Portland districts; Environmental Protection Agency; and Washington departments of Fish and Wildlife, Ecology, and Transportation. Attendees included state legislators, county commissioners, other local elected officials, and county planning staffs; private citizens; and nongovernmental organizations such as the Audubon Society, Fish First, and Washington Homebuilders Association.

Challenged by the congressman to find ways to make the permit system work better, faster, and more smoothly without sacrificing natural resource protection, representatives from state and federal agencies began looking at the system with new eyes. “We found that by working cooperatively with NOAA Fisheries and the Corps on a series of programmatic consultations covering the most common types of requests, coordinating our responses, pooling resources and people, and seeking innovative ways to do business, we could better serve both the public and the natural resources of our area,” said Ken Berg, Manager of the Service’s Western Washington Office. Berg participated in the meetings during all three years.

“We got together and took a hard look at what we were doing, what we needed to do, and what we could do,”

said Steve Landino, NOAA Fisheries Director for the State of Washington. “We looked at our resources, at the tools we had, and we set out to make it better, step by step. We haven’t solved everything yet, but we’ve come a long way in three years.”

Federal streamlining improvements include a web-based consultation submission system and web-based data banks to allow applicants to track the progress of their applications, internal electronic data banks and regular meetings to ease inter-agency coordination, an increased use of programmatic consultations, design guidance for fish-friendly piers and bulkheads, and the expanded use of contractors to review biological evaluations.

Congressman Baird called a joint progress report from the Service, NOAA Fisheries, and Corps symbolic of how the agencies are working together to solve permitting issues. He commended the agencies, saying, “If you were a private company and you could improve your product the way these agencies have improved their product, you’d be winning awards.”

Congressman Baird was not alone in his praise. Bill Lehning, Cowlitz County

Commissioner, told the group, “I just want to say: this is working.” Eric Johnson, a Lewis County Commissioner, called the streamlining efforts a “unique model in leadership.”

Members of the public said they were also pleased by agency efforts to move permits faster, improve customer service, and create and maintain electronic tracking systems to help applicants follow their permits through the system. Some offered suggestions for further improvement.

Congressman Baird promised to get the groups together again in a year for a progress report, and he praised the agencies’ commitment to continued improvement. “The first year we held these roundtables, we heard about problems. The second year we heard about progress. This year we’re hearing about kudos.”

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Bull trout
Photo by Roger Peters