



NEWS RELEASE



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Polluters Finance Projects for Fish and Wildlife

Court settlement leads to creation of Columbia River Estuarine Coastal Fund

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are requesting proposals for conservation and restoration projects that will be funded with \$1.3 million in community service payments from polluters.

Among the largest community service payments ever allocated to restoration in the Pacific Northwest, the money in the ***Columbia River Estuarine Coastal Fund*** will directly benefit the natural resources impacted by the pollution.

“The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will ensure that these funds specifically benefit the natural resources and the local communities along the lower Columbia River that were most affected by these illegal activities,” said Theresa Rabot, Assistant Regional Director for Ecological Services in the Service’s Pacific Region. “The Service is proud to participate in collaborative community efforts to protect and restore the unique natural resources we all depend on in the Pacific Northwest.”

In spring 2004, the owners of the marine vessels Spring Drake, Hoegh Minerva and Agia Erini were charged with violating federal pollution laws. Tipped off by whistleblowers, inspectors from the U.S. Coast Guard and the Washington State Department of Ecology conducted on-board investigations and found evidence of intentional discharges of oily waste from these ships. The U.S. Attorney’s Offices in Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington, prosecuted the ships’ owners and ultimately, achieved court-ordered settlements resulting in \$1.3 million in community service payments to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for conservation and restoration projects in the areas impacted by the discharges.

Karin Immergut, the U.S. Attorney for Oregon, called the settlements a tribute to the hard work and coordinated efforts of a multi-agency task force that included the U.S. Coast Guard, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Washington State Department of Ecology.

“We are committed to using criminal prosecutions to enforce the laws against pollution of our waters,” Immergut said. “I am especially pleased that we can use these cases not only to punish polluters but also to improve the environment in which we live.”

John McKay, U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Washington, agreed.

"Vessel pollution cases are a priority for our office," McKay said. "We have used a variety of strategies and resources to pursue the vessels, personnel, and companies that violate environmental protection laws. It is absolutely appropriate and effective that a portion of the criminal penalties be used to protect, restore and enhance the fragile ecosystems that have been damaged by this criminal conduct."

Together with the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation established the Columbia River Estuarine Coastal Fund as a grant-making program for projects in and along the Lower Columbia River, below Bonneville Dam, and the coasts of Oregon (south to and including Tillamook Bay) and Washington (north to and including Willapa Bay). Grants ranging from a few thousand dollars up to \$200,000 will be awarded to non-profit conservation organizations, counties, cities, state and federal agencies, Tribes and schools. The Foundation will oversee the distribution of the grants.

"The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, as a private, non-profit foundation, is in a unique position to receive and leverage funds from settlements, as well as from private donors, to create partnerships and invest in innovative conservation projects," said Krystyna Wolniakowski, Director of the Foundation's Northwest Regional Office in Portland. "We are extremely pleased that the courts directed these community service payments to the Foundation."

The grants will be used to finance on-the-ground habitat conservation, restoration and management projects; landowner outreach and incentive programs for restoration and management of natural resources; public use and natural/cultural projects that benefit the Service's National Wildlife Refuge System; collaborative projects from local communities seeking environmentally and economically sustainable solutions to natural resource problems; and applied research that is directly related to improvement of natural resources management.

Oregon State Rep. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, praised the creation of the Fund and said it would help foster new relationships between interest groups and government. "I want to think of this Fund as the seed for a future family of funds, yet to be identified, along the Columbia River that help communities reassert their commitment to fish and wildlife and embrace economic development that is in line with environmental values," Johnson said.

Representatives from the States of Washington and Oregon, as well as the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), will work with the Service and the Foundation to review projects for funding. Approximately half of the available funds will be granted through this year's Request for Proposals (RFP) and half will be granted through another Request for Proposals in spring 2005. The first round of grants is expected to be awarded in March 2005. Eventually, other money may be deposited into the Fund from future court settlements or from other donors seeking to support projects in the same geographic area.

The Request for Proposals is posted on the Foundation's website at www.nfwf.org; Applications are due by September 17, 2004. Questions can be directed to Krystyna Wolniakowski, Director, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation-Pacific Northwest, at 503-417-8700, extension 22, or at wolniakowski@nfwf.org , or to Stephen Zylstra, Manager, Environmental Resources Program, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, at 503-231-6179 or at Stephen_Zylstra@fws.gov.

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation is a private, non-profit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization, established by Congress in 1984 and dedicated to the conservation of fish, wildlife, and plants, and the habitat on which they depend. Our goals are to promote healthy populations of fish, wildlife, and plants by generating new commerce for conservation. The Foundation meets these goals by creating partnerships between the public and private sectors and strategically invests in conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. The Foundation does not support lobbying, political advocacy, or litigation.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.