

June 27, 2005

Jon Vanderheyden, District Ranger
Mt. Baker Ranger District, Mt. Baker – Snoqualmie National Forest
810 State Route 20
Sedro-Woolley, WA 98284

RE: North Fork Nooksack Seasonal Closure

Dear District Ranger Vanderheyden:

I am writing on behalf of American Whitewater to express our interest in initiating a review of the existing closure of the North Fork Nooksack River: an annual closure of a 2.5 mile section to recreational boaters from mid-August to late March for the protection of Chinook Salmon. We specifically question the need to extend the closure beyond the time that adult Chinook salmon are actively spawning in the river and request that the Forest Service shorten the closure to end with the conclusion of spawning activities. As a river conservation organization, American Whitewater strongly supports the protection and restoration of threatened and endangered fish populations. We feel however that the closure as implemented is overly restrictive and could be modified to expand recreational opportunities, while having no significant biological impact on Chinook populations.

American Whitewater is a national non-profit 501(c)3 river conservation organization founded in 1954. We have over 6,000 members and 100 affiliate clubs, representing approximately 80,000 whitewater paddlers across the nation. American Whitewater's mission is to conserve and restore America's whitewater resources and to enhance opportunities to enjoy them safely. American Whitewater has an interest in the North Fork Nooksack River as it is a popular destination for our membership valued for the high quality of the whitewater and scenic beauty of the river canyon. The North Fork Nooksack River is a unique and important whitewater resource: for those living in the Bellingham area and the local community of Glacier it is a convenient after-work run, and for those living further away it is well known as a river that maintains consistently good flows throughout the year even when other rivers across the region are too low to paddle in late summer and early fall.

American Whitewater requests that the Forest Service abandon its winter closure policy (following the date that spawning ends) on the North Fork Nooksack and if the Forest Service intends to continue the river closure policy as it has been implemented in the past, we request an opportunity to review and comment on the terms of the closure for the following reasons:

- There has never been a public comment period, or any other opportunity for input from private recreational boaters, since the Forest Service first initiated the closure 4 years ago.
- The Forest Service has had a number of years to monitor and evaluate the recreational closure and the effect it is having on Chinook populations.
- There has been an increase in the number of returning Chinook salmon in recent years and also changes in the hatchery release practices that have influenced distribution of the fish.

There are a number of issues that should be addressed in a review of the closure:

- 1) In the past, the closure has extended not just through the spawning period, but through the time when juveniles hatch and come out of the gravel in April. This seems unreasonably restrictive. Has the Forest

Service documented impacts from boating in the winter on eggs that are hardened in the gravel? Kayakers are very unlikely to get out of their boats in the winter and generally try to avoid damaging their paddles and equipment through contact with rocks or gravel, so it is unlikely that they would have any impact on eggs buried deep in spawning gravel. In addition, recreational use between Labor Day and Memorial Day is more limited than during the summer and tends to be dominated by more experienced paddlers (who are even less likely to exit their boats), which would also limit the potential for impact.

2) The schedule for closure dates should be clarified. Every year the closure is presented as an emergency closure with limited warning. Appropriate signage should be installed at key river access points to educate boaters on the closure throughout the year. As part of this effort the Forest Service could use the opportunity to inform boaters of the reasons for the closure and take advantage of an educational opportunity.

3) Opportunities for education rather than regulation should be explored as the primary means of achieving key management goals. If the Forest Service determines that boaters could have an impact on salmon redds (in our view unlikely for the reasons detailed above) the management needs should be clearly defined and alternative solutions based on education should be reviewed. With an appropriate education plan, that we can develop and implement in partnership with the Forest Service, very limited enforcement for compliance would be required.

4) Land managers should target protection efforts in reaches of the river most important to spawning. There certainly are fish that spawn in the canyon, but generally speaking the reaches of interest to whitewater paddlers have a steeper gradient than generally preferred by spawning Chinook (e.g. the section from Douglas Fir Campground to Glacier Creek). Has the Forest Service evaluated the density of wild spawning fish in these reaches compared to other lower gradient reaches of the river? It strikes us as odd that these 2.5 miles of river would represent the section designated for closure.

5) An annual review of the need for a closure during the time of spawning should be conducted. While we strongly support restoration of Chinook salmon in the Nooksack River watershed, the closure during the time of spawning comes at a very real cost to recreational opportunities on the Mt. Baker–Snoqualmie National Forest. The North Fork Nooksack is a unique recreational resource due to the fact that the river provides boatable flows through the end of summer. If the closure during spawning continues the Forest Service should identify clear management goals that the closure is designed to achieve and implement a monitoring program to evaluate successful progress towards those goals.

In summary, we appreciate the efforts of the Forest Service to support the restoration and protection of Chinook salmon in the North Fork of the Nooksack River; we are committed to development of a plan that provides full protection for a species representing a critical element of a fully functional river ecosystem and cultural icon for the region. We feel however that if the recreational boating closure policy is to continue, it is time for the Forest Service to initiate a review and provide an opportunity for input from the affected user group. If primary issues and concerns are identified, we are committed to working with the Forest Service to develop an education plan to address them. This approach will provide the full protection that salmon need, extending to areas beyond this 2.5 mile section of the North Fork Nooksack, while still providing recreational opportunities that are important and valued by the public.

Sincerely,



Thomas O'Keefe
Pacific Northwest Stewardship Director