



EPA's Bristol Bay Watershed Assessment Update

Bristol Bay, Alaska

Since February 2011, EPA has been working on a scientific analysis of the Bristol Bay watershed to better understand how future large-scale mining may affect the Bristol Bay salmon fishery. The results of the assessment will help us make decisions to protect the resources and habitat on which salmon and other fish depend.

The assessment is focused on the Kvichak and Nushagak watersheds because those drainages are open to development of mineral resources.

EPA initiated the assessment in response to petitions from nine tribes and other stakeholders who asked us to take action to protect salmon because they were concerned about risks posed by large-scale mining. We also heard from other tribes and stakeholders who felt that no action was needed before the mining permitting process began. The watershed assessment will provide EPA with information that will help us respond to both requests.

The Assessment is Starting to Take Shape

The EPA Bristol Bay watershed assessment will have two main sections: One part characterizes salmon resources and other key aspects of the Kvichak and Nushagak watersheds and the second part assesses risks that might cause harm to salmon.

Characterization Reports

EPA has compiled the best available information on Bristol Bay salmon, resident fish, wildlife, culture, economics and roads. We also gathered traditional ecological knowledge by interviewing tribal elders and culture bearers. These characterization reports are currently being reviewed for completeness and accuracy by EPA staff and contractors.

Risk Assessment

Scientists from EPA's Office of Research and Development (ORD) are conducting a detailed evaluation of potential risks from large-scale mining. This evaluation will be the core of the Bristol Bay watershed assessment.

Our goal is to answer key questions about Bristol Bay, including: What is the condition of the resources? Are the resources unique or rare? How do they compare with other areas or regions? What factors have made the resources this way?

How might those factors change as a result of large-scale mining development?

We created a mining scenario to provide a basis for identifying potential risks. This plausible scenario describes a generic mining operation with enough detail to allow EPA to identify potential adverse impacts to salmon fisheries. It is also important to identify measures that could mitigate any potential effects. EPA is using published information on proposed large-scale mining in Bristol Bay to help develop the scenario, but the scenario could apply to any future mine in the watershed.

Conceptual diagrams were developed to show potential relationships between stresses produced by large-scale mining and the salmon resources in the two watersheds. These diagrams helped us prioritize pathways of potential impact to focus the assessment. Federal, state and tribal stakeholders weighed in on these diagrams last summer and provided feedback. The resulting conceptual diagrams are available on our web site.

We look forward to sharing the draft EPA Bristol Bay watershed assessment with you in the spring of 2012 and hearing your feedback. Updated information is posted at

www.epa.gov/region10/bristolbay

Key Dates for EPA's Bristol Bay Watershed Assessment

February 2012 – Opportunity to nominate candidates for the Scientific Peer Review Panel. (closed March 16)

May 2012 – Draft Bristol Bay Watershed Assessment released for public review and input.

May 2012 – Opportunity to comment on the draft charge questions to the Peer Review Panel.

June 2012 – Public meetings in Anchorage and other Bristol Bay communities to listen to public input and talk with you about the Draft Watershed Assessment.

August 2012 – Scientific Peer Review Panel will hold a meeting open to the public in Anchorage.

November 2012 – Final Bristol Bay Watershed Assessment release date.



For More Information:

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Join the Bristol Bay listserv to get regular e-mail updates about EPA's work by sending a request to smith.judy@epa.gov or clicking on the link in the web page.

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