



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
Southeast Regional Office
9721 Executive Center Drive North
St. Petersburg, Florida 33702

March 30, 2000

Lieutenant Colonel Mark S. Held
District Engineer, Charleston District
Department of the Army, Corps of Engineers
Post Office Box 919
Charleston, South Carolina 29402-0919

Dear Colonel Held:

Staff of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the Charleston District (District) have met to discuss Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) consultation requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSFCMA). This letter concerns the District's planning and operations activities subject to provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The EFH regulations (50 CFR part 600) specify that after discussion with a Federal action agency, the NMFS may make a finding that an agency's existing consultation/environmental review processes are adequate, or can be modified, to satisfy EFH consultation requirements.

Existing or modified review processes must meet three criteria to satisfy the consultation provisions of the regulations. The requirements are: 1) the existing process must provide NMFS with timely notification of actions that may adversely affect EFH; 2) notification must include an assessment of impacts of the proposed action as discussed in section 600.920 (g); and, 3) NMFS must have made a finding pursuant to section 600.920(e)(3) that the existing process satisfies the requirements of section 305(b)(2) of the MSFCMA.

Timely Notification

The Charleston District's NEPA process, involving the planning for and preparation of environmental assessments and impact statements and your coordination associated with operational activities, provides the NMFS with timely notification of proposed actions. Your District's public review process generally provides 30 to 90 days before a final decision is rendered on a project.

EFH Assessment

Our staffs have agreed that draft NEPA documents prepared by the District could be modified to contain sufficient information to satisfy the requirements in Section 600.920(g). To satisfy the requirements of an EFH assessment the documents must include: 1) a description of the proposed action; 2) an analysis of individual and cumulative effects on EFH, Federally managed fisheries, and associated species such as major prey species, including affected life history stages; 3) the District's views regarding effects; and, 4) proposed mitigation, if applicable. The draft documents may incorporate such information by reference to a NEPA document prepared for a similar or related action, supplemented with any relevant new project specific information. Incorporation of



information by reference meets EFH consultation requirements provided the proposed action involves similar adverse impacts to EFH in the same geographic area or similar ecological setting, and the referenced document has been provided to NMFS.

In some cases the District prepares notices to supplement NEPA actions or may coordinate on environmental issues prior to initiation of the NEPA review process. When supplemental notices are prepared, they could be modified to reference EFH assessments contained in a companion environmental document or EFH could be addressed separately. Similarly, the District could accomplish "pre-NEPA" consultations by providing NMFS a separate request for EFH consultation and an EFH assessment. In this latter case, a summary of the consultation should be included in any resulting NEPA document.

Finding

Consultation Initiation

The NMFS finds that your agency's NEPA process for evaluating civil works activities can be used to satisfy the consultation requirements of the MSFCMA. Specifically, notification of potential impacts on EFH will occur when the District sends NMFS a draft NEPA document, a project notification, or a separate request for consultation prior to initiating formal NEPA action. In cases involving maintenance activities (especially navigation channels) EFH consultation normally will not be conducted for each event. Rather, consultation will be incorporated into the District's NEPA compliance or public notification processes which normally occur when project design parameters change.

Assessment

The evaluation of project impacts on EFH will be addressed in the draft documents in a section or chapter titled "EFH Assessment" or by reference to companion documents. The EFH assessment may also be presented as a separate request for consultation. These project evaluations should include both an identification of affected EFH and an assessment of impacts. The EFH discussion may reference pertinent information on the affected environment and environmental consequences when they are provided in other sections, chapters, or companion documents.

Coordination

After receiving an EFH consultation request and assessment, and within the specified public comment period, NMFS will provide the District with a written project evaluation which will include EFH conservation recommendations, when appropriate. NMFS will provide such recommendations as a part of our overall project comments. When EFH issues are raised, they will be contained in a separate section titled "EFH Conservation Recommendations." Written concurrences with District determinations that a project would not adversely impact EFH are not required and will not be provided, although consistent with past practice, NMFS normally will provide a written response indicating that we have no recommendations to offer.

Under Section 305(b)(4)(B) of the MSFCMA, the Charleston District has a statutory requirement to respond in writing within 30 days to EFH recommendations made by the NMFS. If the District

will not be able to complete a signed Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), Record of Decision (ROD), or other final action within 30 days of receiving NMFS EFH Conservation Recommendations, the District should provide NMFS with an interim written response within 30 days. District personnel should then provide a detailed response at least 10 days prior to taking final action (e.g., signing a FONSI or ROD).

Higher Level Review

If a District decision is inconsistent with NMFS EFH conservation recommendations, NMFS will endeavor to resolve any such issues at the field level wherever possible. However, 50 CFR 600.920(j)(2) allows the NOAA Assistant Administrator for Fisheries to request a meeting with a Department of the Army headquarters official to discuss the proposed action and opportunities for resolving disagreements.

The overall consultation process is briefly outlined in enclosure 1. Also, to assist you in document preparation, I have included, as enclosure 2, a description of how an abbreviated EFH assessment might be incorporated in an environmental assessment prepared by the District.

Conclusion

We request a letter of response, indicating your acceptance of these procedures or suggesting revisions thereto, by May 5, 2000. You or your staff may contact Mr. Rickey Ruebsamen, the Southeast Region's EFH Coordinator, at 727/570-5317, if you have any questions or wish to discuss this finding.

Sincerely,



Andreas Mager, Jr.
Assistant Regional Administrator

Enclosures

Outline of NMFS - Charleston District Process for EFH Consultation for Federal Project Planning and Operations

- ▶ **COE provides the NMFS with an environmental document, Federal project public notice, or “pre-NEPA” notification**
 - ▶ **The COE document indicates that it is intended to initiate EFH consultation**
 - ▶ **Document includes the required components of an EFH assessment**
 - ▶ **NMFS is allowed sufficient time to review and comment**

- ▶ **NMFS provides EFH conservation recommendations, as appropriate, within specified time frames**

- ▶ **COE responds to NMFS EFH conservation recommendations**
 - ▶ **A final response is provided to the NMFS within 30 days, or an interim response may be transmitted if final action on the project cannot be completed within that time**
 - ▶ **Final response is provided to the NMFS at least 10 days prior to final action/approval (e.g., signing of a FONSI or ROD)**
 - ▶ **If NMFS recommendations are not accepted, the COE response includes a detailed explanation of why NMFS recommendations are not being followed and a scientific justification for any disagreements over anticipated EFH impacts**

- ▶ **NMFS may seek headquarters-level review of those Charleston District decisions contrary to NMFS conservation recommendations**

Recommended Contents of an EFH Assessment as Part of a Draft NEPA Document or Consultation Request Letter

- I. The consultation request letter or NEPA document transmittal letter, introduction, summary, or abstract should state that the document and information contained therein represent the agency's initiation of EFH consultation
- II. Description of the proposed action - use existing agency format and requirements
- III. Analysis of effects - EFH assessments can be prepared in a letter or report format, provided the required information [see 50 CFR 600.920(g)] is included, or incorporated in a NEPA document in a manner similar to the following:

A. The description of fish and wildlife resources and vegetative communities contained in the chapter describing the existing environment should be expanded to specifically identify Federally managed fisheries and EFH in the project area. For activities expected to minimally impact EFH, these can be brief discussions. For example, in the fisheries description, the text might read: *Juvenile and adult red drum and postlarval and juvenile brown and white shrimp are common in the project area and are managed under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (PL 104-297).* As part of the description of vegetative communities, the text could be supplemented with statements similar to the following: *The generic amendment to South Atlantic Fishery Management Plans (SAFMC 1999) identifies Essential Fish Habitat in the project area to be intertidal wetlands, submerged aquatic vegetation, unvegetated bottoms, shell reefs, and the estuarine water column. Habitat Areas of Particular Concern have not been identified for the project area.* Note that EFH may include open water and non-vegetated habitats, therefore, the Federal agency may find it more appropriate to describe EFH separately from vegetative communities.

More complex projects or those potentially having substantial EFH impacts should include a greater level of detail on life stages, seasonality of occurrence, environmental requirements, etc. of managed and associated fisheries. Similarly, the description of EFH should be discussed in more depth. The action agency may determine prior to initiation of consultation that expanded consultation should be requested pursuant to 50 CFR 600.920(i).

B. The discussion of environmental consequences portion of the document should include a separate section entitled "EFH Assessment" which includes an evaluation of project and cumulative effects, the action agency's evaluation of those effects, and any mitigation proposed. The scope of this section should be determined by the anticipated level of impact. For projects expected to have minimal impacts, this assessment could be a one paragraph section similar to the following: *The "Big Bay*

Dredging project” would affect xx acres of coastal habitat identified as EFH. Impacts to bay bottom, intertidal marsh, and submerged aquatic vegetation and federally managed species are addressed in Section 5.2 of the environmental assessment. We consider these impacts to be minimal on an individual project and cumulative affects basis. Because those impacts are minor, mitigation is not being proposed.

In instances where impacts would be more than minor, the “**EFH Assessment**” should be sufficiently detailed (by reference to other sections of the report or other environmental documents, where appropriate) to fully describe project impacts, effects on EFH and dependent resources, and mitigation to offset the unavoidable impacts to the managed resources. Consideration also should be given to supplementing the assessment with information from site inspections and evaluations, pertinent literature, expert opinion, and discussion of less damaging alternatives (or reference to such discussion presented elsewhere in the document).

- IV. Federal agency views - the District’s views regarding EFH impacts can be specified as a part of the “**EFH Assessment**” and/or included and highlighted in the section of the environmental document which presents the agency’s conclusions about the subject action.
- V. Proposed mitigation - if mitigation is appropriate and proposed, it should be identified in the “**EFH Assessment**” and described in detail in the section of the environmental document reserved for such discussion. The discussion of mitigation of EFH impacts should be presented separately from the discussion of other proposed mitigative measures.



REPLY TO
ATTENTION OF

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
CHARLESTON DISTRICT, CORPS OF ENGINEERS
334 Meeting Street
P.O. BOX 919
CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA 29402-0919

May 16, 2000

Technical Services Division

Mr. Andreas Mager, Jr.
Assistant Regional Administrator
U.S. Department of Commerce
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
9721 Executive Center Drive North
St. Petersburg, Florida 33702

Dear Mr. Mager:

This is in reference to your letter dated March 30, 2000, wherein you make reference to coordination efforts between the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the Charleston District's Technical Services Division concerning the Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) consultation requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSFCMA). The referenced letter details the requirements of the MSFCMA regarding notification and EFH assessment pertaining to the Corps' planning and operations activities.

The Charleston District Technical Services Division concurs with the "Finding" provisions detailed in your letter, including the procedural methodologies between our agencies associated with initiating EFH consultation, coordination and "higher level review". Henceforth, my staff will implement the processes identified in your letter and its attachments entitled "Enclosure 1" and "Enclosure 2". It should be recognized that minor modifications to our interagency coordination efforts might prove necessary in the future to deal with currently unforeseen circumstances. However, any changes to these agreed upon procedures will be coordinated with the NMFS prior to implementation.

In conclusion, the Charleston District Technical Services Division agrees with and accepts the procedures pertaining to the EFH consultation requirements of the MSFCMA identified in your letter and looks forward to our continued cooperative relationship.

If you have any questions regarding this matter, please contact Mr. Larry Hanford at (843) 746-2844.

Respectfully,


Mathew M. Laws III, P.E.
Chief, Technical Services Division