



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
NORTHEAST REGION
55 Great Republic Drive
Gloucester, MA 01930-2276

Deborah R. Hutchinson, Ph.D.
U.S. Geological Survey
Woods Hole Science Center
384 Woods Hole Rd.
Woods Hole, MA 02543

JUN 20 2014

Dear Dr. Hutchinson:

This responds to your June 3, 2014, electronic mail inquiry regarding essential fish habitat (EFH) consultation requirements for a proposed regional marine two-dimensional seismic reflection scientific research survey in the Atlantic Ocean over the next two years. The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), in cooperation with the National Science Foundation (NSF), prepared an environmental assessment (EA) dated May 2014 tiered off a 2011 Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (FPEIS)/Overseas Environmental Impact Statement (OEIS) for Marine Seismic Research funded by the NSF. The study area is in the northwest Atlantic Ocean U.S. exclusive economic zone (EEZ) off Delaware and North Carolina and extends into international waters as far as 350 nautical miles from the coast.

In accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act), EFH has been identified and described in the EEZ portions of the study area by the New England, Mid-Atlantic, and South Atlantic Fishery Management Councils and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The Magnuson-Stevens Act specifies consultation with NMFS is required for federal actions which may adversely affect EFH. As the federal action agency for this matter, the USGS and NSF have determined the proposed survey activities may result in minor adverse impacts to water column habitats identified and described as EFH. The Habitat Conservation Divisions (HCDs) in the Southeast Regional and Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Offices have reviewed the analysis and proposed mitigation measures contained in the FPEIS/OEIS and the EA prepared for this action. Upon considering the design and nature of the survey we have no EFH conservation recommendations to provide pursuant to Section 305(b)(2) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act at this time.

However, much of the research available to date on the adverse effects of seismic survey activities on aquatic resources has been focused on marine mammals. Little information is available on the effects of these activities on fish and benthic organisms. Additional research and monitoring is needed to gain a better understanding of the potential effects these activities may have on EFH, federally managed species, their prey and other NOAA trust resources. This type of research should be a component of future NSF funded seismic survey activities. This will aid in the development of site and project specific EFH conservation recommendations for future projects as appropriate.



Be advised that by separate correspondence the HCDs have provided similar determinations to the NMFS Office of Protected Resources for their evaluation of an Incidental Harassment Authorization request for this action. Further EFH consultation on this matter by the USGS and NSF is not necessary unless future modifications to the survey are proposed and such actions may result in adverse impacts to EFH.

NMFS comments originate from two regions. The contacts for these offices are:

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If we can be of further assistance, please advise.

Sincerely,



Louis A. Chiarella
Assistant Regional Administrator
For Habitat Conservation

cc:

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