

Colonel Allan Carroll, District Engineer

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

803 Front Street

Norfolk, Virginia 23510-1096

Dear Colonel Carroll:

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSFCMA) requires federal agencies such as the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) to consult with the Secretary of Commerce regarding any action or proposed action authorized, funded, or undertaken by the agency that may adversely affect Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) identified under the Act. The first designations of EFH became effective on March 3, 1999 upon their approval by the Secretary. National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) personnel have discussed the new EFH requirements with your Regulatory Branch staff to determine the most efficient means to address EFH consultations for permits issued by the ACOE. Our staffs have agreed to conduct the required consultations using the ACOE's existing regulatory process under Section 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act, Section 404 of the Clean Water Act, and Section 103 of the Marine Protection Research and Sanctuaries Act, as described below. (Please note that we are also discussing with the ACOE North Atlantic Division the options for using the National Environmental Policy Act process to carry out EFH consultations for ACOE civil works projects such as navigation, flood control, and shoreline stabilization.)

The EFH regulations, 50 CFR Section 600.920(e)(3), enable federal agencies to use existing consultation/environmental review procedures to satisfy the MSFCMA consultation requirements if the existing procedures meet the following criteria: 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. NMFS finds that the existing process used by the ACOE Norfolk District for projects authorized under Section 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act, Section 404 of the Clean Water Act, and Section 103 of the Marine Protection Research and Sanctuaries Act may be used to satisfy the consultation requirements of the MSFCMA provided that NMFS and the ACOE adhere to the following steps:

1. Notification

The ACOE must provide NMFS with timely notification of actions that may adversely affect EFH. For projects authorized through the individual permit process, notification for the purposes of the EFH consultation can be accomplished in the ACOE Public Notice. For actions authorized via nationwide permits or regional general permits for which NMFS has not issued a General Concurrence, notification for the purposes of the EFH consultation should occur when NMFS receives a description of the proposed project (e.g., by fax).

2. EFH Assessment

For most projects the EFH Assessment can be included as a statement in the Public Notice or in the transmittal of the nationwide or general permit project notification. In such cases, the ACOE should indicate in the document that it has preliminarily determined that the project will not have a substantial adverse effect on EFH, and therefore expanded EFH consultation is not required. Based on comments from NMFS in response to this notification, further EFH consultation may be necessary.

The level of detail in the EFH Assessment should be commensurate with the level of threat to EFH. For routine projects the EFH Assessment will be addressed during normal coordination as described above. However, actions that may cause substantial adverse effects to EFH will require a separate detailed EFH Assessment, which could be prepared by the permit applicant if appropriate. NMFS will notify the ACOE as early as possible (e.g., during pre-application coordination) in cases where a detailed EFH Assessment is necessary. Upon completion of a detailed EFH Assessment, the ACOE will submit the document to NMFS for review and preparation of EFH Conservation Recommendations.

EFH Assessments must include: 1) a description of the proposed action; 2) an analysis of individual and cumulative effects of the action on EFH, the managed species, and associated species such as major prey species, including affected life history stages; 3) the ACOE's views regarding effects on EFH; and, 4) a discussion of proposed mitigation, if applicable. Additional information which may be appropriate to include in an EFH Assessment is listed in 50 CFR 600.920(g)(3).

An EFH Assessment may incorporate information by reference to another EFH Assessment prepared for a similar action, supplemented with any relevant new project specific information, provided that the proposed action involves similar impacts to EFH in the same geographic area or a similar ecological setting, and provided that a copy of the prior EFH Assessment is attached to facilitate review by NMFS. An EFH Assessment may also incorporate or append other relevant assessment documents.

3. NMFS EFH Recommendations

Upon review of the EFH Assessment, NMFS will develop EFH Conservation Recommendations as part of its comments on the project. For projects on which NMFS comments by letter, NMFS will provide these recommendations in a separate section of the NMFS comment letter titled "EFH Conservation Recommendations." For projects authorized under a reporting nationwide or general permit or discussed at joint permit processing meetings, NMFS may note the EFH Conservation Recommendations on the agency comment form where NMFS normally provides comments on the project. In all cases, NMFS will provide its recommendations during the regular (or extended) comment period.

4. ACOE Response

Under section 305(b)(4)(B) of the MSFCMA, the ACOE must provide a written response to NMFS within 30 days after receiving the NMFS EFH Conservation Recommendations. If the ACOE is not able to respond fully within 30 days, the ACOE must send a preliminary response within this time period stating that it has received NMFS recommendations, will consider them fully, has not yet made a decision on the project, but will respond to NMFS recommendations in detail as soon as possible. The ACOE response should be provided to NMFS at least 10 days before the ACOE makes a final permit decision, to allow time for dispute resolution if necessary.

The ACOE response must include a description of measures proposed by the ACOE for avoiding, mitigating, or offsetting the impact of the activity on EFH, as required by section 305(b)(4)(B) of the MSFCMA and 50 CFR 600.920(j). In the case of a response that is inconsistent with NMFS Conservation Recommendations, the ACOE must explain its reasons for not following the recommendations, including the scientific justification for any disagreements with NMFS over the anticipated effects of the action or the measures needed to avoid, minimize, mitigate, or offset such effects.

To promote efficiency, the ACOE may respond to NMFS EFH Conservation Recommendations in a single letter that discusses numerous projects. For example, the ACOE may wish to send NMFS one response monthly that covers all EFH Conservation Recommendations provided during the preceding 30 days.

5. Dispute Resolution

If an ACOE decision is inconsistent with NMFS EFH Conservation Recommendations, 50 CFR 600.920(j)(2) allows the NOAA Assistant Administrator for Fisheries to request a meeting with the head of the ACOE to discuss the proposed action and opportunities for resolving any disagreements. NMFS will endeavor to resolve any such issues at the field level wherever possible, typically in a meeting between the NMFS Regional Administrator and the ACOE District Engineer.

Conclusion

If you agree with the procedures described above, please respond by letter indicating your concurrence. Should you have any questions on this matter, please contact Peter Colosi at 978-281-9332 or Jon Kurland at 978-281-9204.

Sincerely,

Jon C. Rittgers

Acting Regional Administrator