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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

RIN 0648-XD643

Notice of Availability of a Draft Programmatic Environmental Assessment for Fisheries

Research Conducted and Funded by the National Marine Fisheries Service, Northeast Fisheries Science Center

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice of availability of a Draft Programmatic Environmental Assessment; Request for comments.

SUMMARY: NMFS announces the availability of the “Draft Programmatic Environmental Assessment (DPEA) for Fisheries Research Conducted and Funded by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC).” Publication of this notice begins the official public comment period for this DPEA. The purpose of the DPEA is to evaluate, in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the potential direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of conducting and funding fisheries and ecosystem research along the U.S. East Coast, including of the Northeast Continental Shelf Large Marine Ecosystem (LME) and the Southeast Continental Shelf Large Marine Ecosystem (LME).

DATES: Comments and information must be received no later than [insert date 30 days after date of publication in the FEDERAL REGISTER].

ADDRESSES: Comments on the DPEA should be addressed to Nathan Keith, NMFS NEFSC Woods Hole Laboratory, 166 Water Street, Woods Hole, MA 02543. The mailbox address for

providing email comments is NEFSC.DPEA@noaa.gov. NMFS is not responsible for email comments sent to addresses other than the one provided here. Comments sent via email, including all attachments, must not exceed a 10-megabyte file size.

A copy of the DPEA may be obtained by writing to the address specified above, telephoning the contact listed below (see FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT), or visiting the internet at: <http://nefsc.noaa.gov/dpea.aspx>. Documents cited in this notice may also be viewed, by appointment, during regular business hours, at the aforementioned address.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Nathan Keith, NEFSC, NMFS, (508) 495-2224.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

The NEFSC is the research arm of NMFS in the Northeast Region. The NEFSC conducts research and provides scientific advice to manage fisheries and conserve protected species in the Atlantic Ocean from the U.S.-Canada border to Florida. Most NEFSC-conducted and funded fisheries research occurs in the Northeast U.S. Continental Shelf LME but also occurs in the Southeast U.S. Continental Shelf LME and adjacent offshore areas. Research is aimed at monitoring fish stock recruitment, survival and biological rates, abundance and geographic distribution of species and stocks, and providing other scientific information needed to improve our understanding of complex marine ecological processes. Primary research activities include: bottom trawl surveys to support assessments of multiple groundfish and shrimp species as well as the status of benthic habitats, pelagic trawl surveys to assess Atlantic herring and Atlantic salmon stocks, dredge and video camera surveys to assess scallop stocks and habitat recovery, longline and gillnet surveys to research life history parameters and abundance of numerous shark species, and extensive cooperative research projects designed to address current or emerging information needs of the commercial fishing industry such as bycatch reduction efforts and

development of new fisheries. Many research activities also include active acoustic systems, plankton nets, and other oceanographic equipment that provide important data on the status and trends of marine ecosystems important for various fisheries and natural resource management processes.

NMFS has prepared the DPEA under NEPA to evaluate several alternatives for conducting and funding fisheries and ecosystem research activities as the primary federal action. Additionally in the DPEA, NMFS evaluates a secondary federal action—also called a “connected action” under 40 CFR 1508.25 of the Council on Environmental Quality’s regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of NEPA (42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq.)—which is the proposed promulgation of regulations and authorization of the take of marine mammals incidental to the fisheries research under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Additionally, because the proposed research activities occur in areas inhabited by species of marine mammals, birds, sea turtles, and fish listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) as threatened or endangered, this DPEA evaluates activities that could result in unintentional takes of ESA-listed marine species.

The following four alternatives are evaluated in the DPEA:

- No-Action/Status Quo Alternative – Conduct Federal Fisheries and Ecosystem Research with Scope and Protocols Similar to Past Effort
- Preferred Alternative – Conduct Federal Fisheries and Ecosystem Research (New Suite of Research) with Mitigation for MMPA and ESA Compliance
- Modified Research Alternative – Conduct Federal Fisheries and Ecosystem Research (New Suite of Research) with Additional Mitigation

- No Research Alternative – No Fieldwork for Federal Fisheries and Ecosystem Research Conducted or Funded by NEFSC.

The first three alternatives include a program of fisheries and ecosystem research projects conducted or funded by the NEFSC as the primary federal action. Because this primary action is connected to a secondary federal action to consider authorizing incidental take of marine mammals under the MMPA, NMFS must identify as part of this evaluation “(t)he means of effecting the least practicable adverse impact on the species or stock and its habitat.” (Section 101(a)(5)(A) of the MMPA [16 U.S.C. 1361 et seq.]). NMFS must therefore identify and evaluate a reasonable range of mitigation measures to minimize impacts to marine mammals that occur in NEFSC research areas. These mitigation measures are considered as part of the identified alternatives in order to evaluate their effectiveness to minimize potential adverse environmental impacts. The three action alternatives also include mitigation measures intended to minimize potentially adverse interactions with other protected species that occur within the action area. Protected species include all marine mammals, which are covered under the MMPA, all species listed under the ESA, and bird species protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

NMFS is also evaluating a second type of no-action alternative that considers no federal funding for fieldwork on fisheries and ecosystem research activities. This is called the No Research Alternative to distinguish it from the No-Action/Status Quo Alternative. The No-Action/Status Quo Alternative will be used as the baseline to compare all of the other alternatives.

Potential direct and indirect effects on the environment are evaluated under each alternative in the DPEA. The environmental effects on the following resources are considered: physical environment, special resource areas, fish, marine mammals, birds, sea turtles,

invertebrates, and the social and economic environment. Cumulative effects of external actions and the contribution of fisheries research activities to the overall cumulative impact on the aforementioned resources is also evaluated in the DPEA for the geographic regions in which NEFSC surveys are conducted.

NMFS requests comments on the DPEA for Fisheries Research Conducted and Funded by the National Marine Fisheries Service, Northeast Fisheries Science Center. Please include, with your comments, any supporting data or literature citations that may be informative in substantiating your comment.

Dated: December 22, 2014.

William Karp,

Director,

Northeast Fisheries Science Center,

National Marine Fisheries Service.

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