Determination of Effect on Essential Fish Habitat from Florida FWC Strategic Boat Access: City of St. Marks Boat Ramp Improvements project

EFH overview from Magnuson Stevens Act

The 1996 Magnuson-Stevens Act requires cooperation among the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), anglers, and federal and state agencies to protect, conserve, and enhance Essential Fish Habitat (EFH). EFH is defined as those waters and substrates necessary to fish for spawning, breeding, feeding, or growth to maturity. The designation and conservation of EFH seek to minimize adverse effects on habitat caused by fishing and non-fishing activities.

Project description

The proposed Florida FWC Strategic Boat Access project would improve the existing City of St. Marks boat ramp by adding a boarding dock to the existing one-lane boat ramp shown in Figure 1, which is no longer used for motor boat launching. This boarding dock, which would be placed approximately where the "star" is located in Figure 1, would be used primarily to facilitate the launching, loading, and removal of non-motorized watercraft (e.g., canoes, kayaks). There would be no expansion or enhancement of the existing boat launch used for motorized watercraft shown in Figure 1.Figure 2 shows the project location and surrounding area.

Figure 1. A detailed view of the project area (star indicates approximate location for proposed new boarding dock).

Figure 2. A view of the project location and surrounding area.

Federally managed fisheries and EFH (develop table from

Information on designated EFH in the Gulf of Mexico was obtained in September, 2013 from the NMFS' EFH web site at *http://www.habitat.noaa.gov/protection/efh/newInv/index.html*. Table 1 provides a summary of the species identified as having designated EFH for one or more life stages within the area of potential affect for the proposed project.

Table 1. Federally managed fisheries with designated Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) in the proposed project area.

EFH Category	Species
Coastal Migratory Pelagics of the Gulf of Mexico AND South Atlantic	
	Cobia
	King Mackerel

	Spanish Mackerel
Gulf of Mexico Red Drum	
	Red Drum
Gulf of Mexico Shrimp	
	Brown Shrimp
	Pink Shrimp
	Rock Shrimp
	Seabob Shrimp
	White Shrimp
Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf of Mexico	
	Almaco Jack
	Banded Rudderfish
	Black Grouper
	Blackfin Snapper
	Blueline Tilefish
	Cubera Snapper
	Gag
	Goldface Tilefish
	Gray (Mangrove) Snapper
	Gray Triggerfish
	Greater Amberjack
	Hogfish
	Lane Snapper
	Lesser Amberjack
	Mutton Snapper
	Nassau Grouper
	Queen Snapper
	Red Grouper
	Red Snapper
	Scamp
	Silk Snapper
	Snowy Grouper
	Speckled Hind
	Tilefish
	Vermilion Snapper
	Warsaw Grouper
	Wenchman
	Yellowedge Grouper
	Yellowfin Grouper
	Yellowmouth Grouper

Assessment of effects to EFH

Restoration actions at the St. Marks boat ramp are expected to have no to minor impacts on EFH. The proposed boarding dock construction will take place at the existing boat ramp, which is located in a partially developed area. While not visible in Figure 1, the existing one lane boat ramp used to have an associated dock approximately where the new dock would be placed (the former dock was removed years ago for safety concerns). Constructing the new boarding dock would convert a small area that potentially provides habitat to a less favorable condition by installing pilings and shading the area under the dock.

As part of final design effort, a survey of submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) in the area would be completed. Existing information suggests SAV is in the area around the point where the pier will be constructed. Should the site assessment for the project identify SAV in the proposed project area, the conditions in the *Construction Guidelines in Florida for Minor Piling-Supported Structures Constructed in or over Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV), Marsh or Mangrove Habitat* (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers/National Marine Fisheries Service, 2001 – See Appendix A) would be implemented. Among other elements that would result should these guidelines need to be implemented, there would requirements that pilings be placed a minimum of 10 feet apart and there would be requirements for the height of the pier and spacing of decking materials.

However, given that the location is already actively used as a boat launch facility and formerly supported a dock structure, it is unlikely that the project location currently provides high-quality habitat. Constructing the dock may reduce habitat disturbance long-term by providing a designated location where boaters can temporarily moor their vessels and from which to board the boats.

The size of the proposed boarding dock has not been finalized but will be small and will be defined in the final project design documents. The size of the potential habitat conversion is very small relative to the amount of habitat available in the surrounding area and will take place directly adjacent to an area that is already developed and managed for launching boats.

Construction activities will likely have a temporary negative impact on habitat. Disturbance caused by the use of heavy equipment, sediment disturbance, potential increase of debris in the water, and increased noise associated with building the new boarding dock (e.g., placing new pilings) may affect any species using the habitat near the boat ramp. During construction, all appropriate BMPs will be followed to minimize the potential impacts of construction activities on EFH and species in the area. During construction, adjacent areas with equivalent or better habitat will be available and undisturbed and organisms could move away from disturbed areas. Adverse habitat mpacts from the use of the dock itself are not expected given the dock is intended to support non-motorized craft and recognizing that the area is already used by these recreational users. As a result, development of the dock could reduce adverse impacts compared to the current launch practices of these users.

Conclusion

The project is not likely to adversely affect EFH. The proposed boarding dock construction will take place adjacent to the existing boat ramp. A very small area of subtidal habitat may be converted with the placing of pilings for the new dock, however, this will take place directly adjacent to the boat ramp, where the habitat is already likely to be significantly disturbed as a result of both the boat traffic to and from the boat ramp, the use of the existing boat launch structure and shoreline habitat, and the fact the project area was formerly part of a launch area for motorized-watercraft. Disturbance to species will be minor and brief.

References

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers/National Marine Fisheries Service. 2001. *Construction Guidelines in Florida for Minor Piling-Supported Structures Constructed in or over Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV), Marsh or Mangrove Habitat.* August.