Subject: DWH-Early Restoration- Essential Fish Habitat Consultation Initiation-Florida Walton County Boardwalks and Dune Crossovers: Bayside Ranchettes Park Improvements project
From: Jamie Schubert-NOAA Federal <jamie.schubert@noaa.gov>
Date: 3/13/2014 2:42 PM
To: "Mark Thompson (NOAA Federal)" <mark.thompson@noaa.gov>, Rusty Swafford <Rusty.Swafford@noaa.gov>, Virginia Fay <virginia.fay@noaa.gov>, Leslie Craig <leslie.craig@noaa.gov>, Jamey Redding <Jamey.Redding@noaa.gov>, "Jeff Shenot (Jeff.Shenot@noaa.gov)" <Jeff.Shenot@noaa.gov>

Mr. Thompson,
Attached is the Essential Fish Habitat Assessment for the Florida Walton County Boardwalks and Dune Crossovers: Bayside Ranchettes Park Improvements project. This project is being proposed in the Deepwater Horizon Draft Phase III Early Restoration plan and Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement. Please consider this our initiation of our Essential Fish Habitat consultation. If you anticipate this consultation requiring more than 30 days (April 14, 2014) please let me know.

If you have any questions or require additional information, please contact me at 409-621-1248 or at jamie.schubert@noaa.gov.
Thanks,

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Jamie Schubert
NOAA Fisheries-Restoration Center
4700 Avenue U
Galveston, Texas 77551

Phone-409-621-1248

Attachments:

DWH-ER-EFH-Walton-Co-Bayside-Ranchettes-2014-02-13.docx	434 KB

Determination of Effect on Essential Fish Habitat from the Florida Walton County Boardwalks and Dune Crossovers: Bayside Ranchettes Park 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 Walton County Boardwalks and Dune Crossovers project would improve the Bayside Ranchettes Park in Walton County (Figure 1). The proposed improvements include constructing a parking area, a picnic table, a dock, and steps into the water allowing access to the bay. Figure 1 illustrates the project location

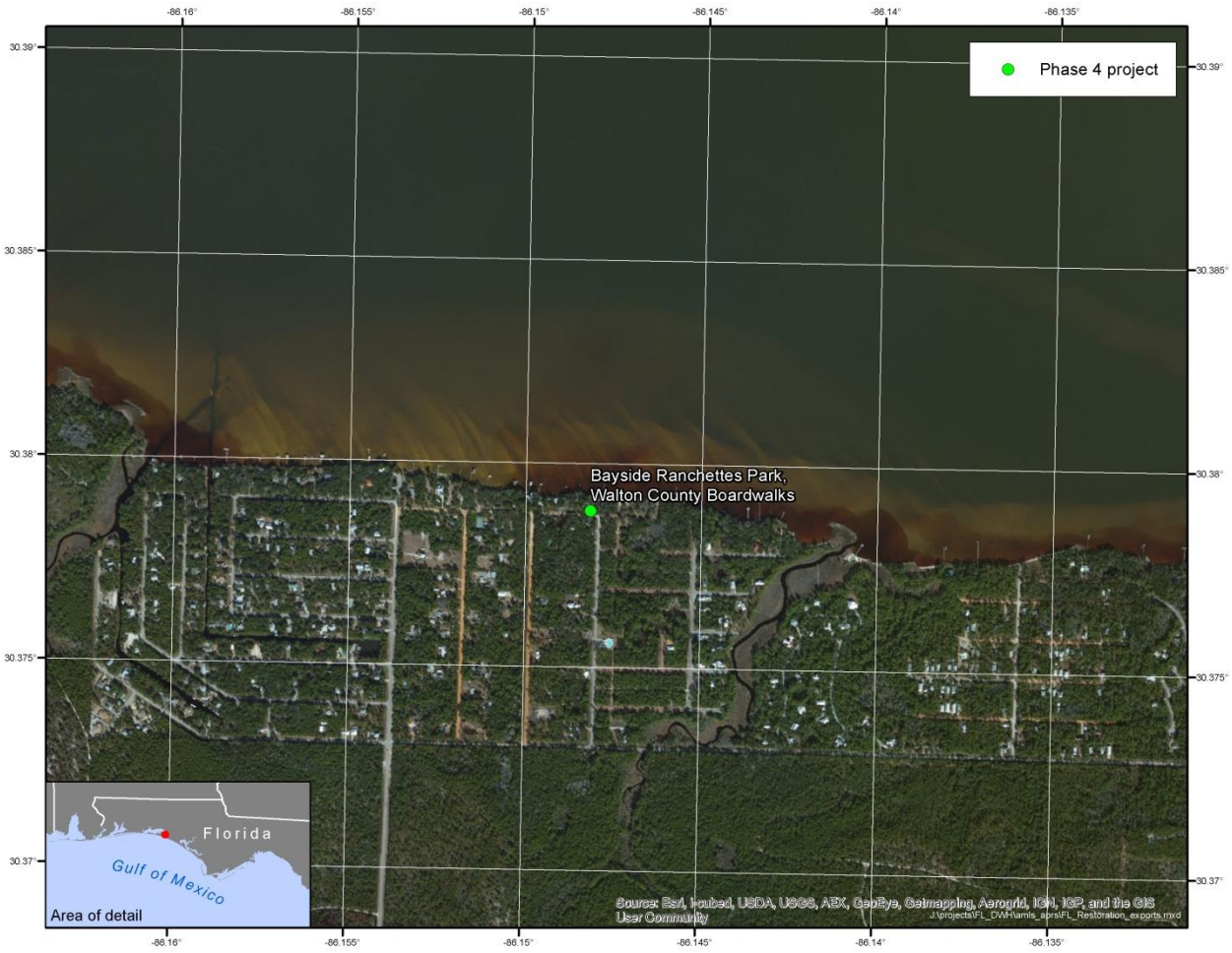

Figure 1. Location of envisioned Bayside Ranchettes Park Improvements Project.

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*. 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 species with designated Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) in the proposed project area.

EFH Category	Species
Atlantic Highly Migratory Species	
	Atlantic Sharpnose Shark - Neonate
	Bull Shark - Adult
	Nurse Shark - Juvenile
	Sandbar Shark - Adult
	Scalloped Hammerhead Shark - Juvenile
	Scalloped Hammerhead Shark - Neonate
	Tiger Shark - Juvenile
Coastal Migratory Pelagics of the Gulf of Mexico AND South Atlantic	
	Spanish Mackerel
	Cobia
	King Mackerel
Gulf of Mexico Red Drum	
	Red Drum
Gulf of Mexico Shrimp	
	Pink Shrimp
	Rock Shrimp
	Seabob Shrimp
	White Shrimp
	Brown Shrimp
Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf of Mexico	
	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

EFH Category	Species
Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf of Mexico continued	
	Yellowedge Grouper
	Yellowfin Grouper
	Yellowmouth Grouper
	Almaco Jack
	Banded Rudderfish
	Black Grouper
	Blackfin Snapper
	Blueline Tilefish
	Cubera Snapper
	Gag
	Goldface Tilefish
	Gray (Mangrove) Snapper
	Gray Triggerfish
	Greater Amberjack
	Hogfish

Assessment of effects to EFH

Restoration actions at the Bayside Ranchettes Park are expected to have no to minor impacts on EFH. The proposed dock and steps construction will take place at least partially in-water, near the shoreline and in an area where other docks are present. All other components of the project – creating a new parking area and adding a picnic table – would be constructed above mean high water and would lack a direct connection to identified EFH management areas. Constructing the dock and steps into the bay will convert a small area that potentially provides habitat to a less favorable condition by installing the steps, pilings for the dock, and shading of the area under the dock after it is constructed. As a public park, the area is already used by the public for access to the shoreline and water. As a result, constructing the dock and steps may reduce habitat disturbance in the long-term by providing a designated location where the public can access the water. At this time, with no dock or steps available, the sediment and shoreline habitat are likely frequently disturbed by foot traffic in and out of the water.

The exact size of the proposed dock and steps has not yet been determined, but will be provided in the final project design documents. However, the size of the potential habitat conversion will be 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.

Construction activities will likely have a temporary negative impact on EFH. 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 dock and steps (e.g., placing new pilings) may affect any species using the habitat near the work area. 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.

Conclusion

The project is not likely to adversely affect EFH. The proposed dock construction will take place adjacent to the existing boat ramp. A small area of subtidal habitat would be converted with the placing of pilings for the new dock and steps, however, this will take place near the shoreline and the project is located in an area where the habitat is already likely to be significantly disturbed by the presence and use of nearby docks and, to a lesser degree, by the lack of formal points of access to the water. Disturbance to species will be minor and brief.