UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
Southeast Regional Office
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St. Petersburg, Florida 33701-5505
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March 17, 2014

MEMORANDUM TO: Leslie Craig
Southeast Region Supervisor, NOAA Restoration Center

FROM: Virginia M. Fay
Assistant Regional Administrator, Habitat Conservation Division

SUBJECT: Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) assessment review for the construction of artificial reefs in the Gulf of Mexico offshore of Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton and Bay Counties, Florida

In response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, construction of artificial reefs is proposed in the Gulf of Mexico in both deep water and shallow water habitats near the shorelines of Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton, and Bay Counties, Florida. This would include placement of linear structures consisting of concrete and stone rubble and pre-fabricated artificial reef modules. Deeper reefs would have a single prefabricated, modular design and shallower "snorkeling" reefs would have a layered, piling-mounted design. Marine non-vegetated bottoms and water column will be impacted by the construction of the project and are identified and described as EFH under provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act).

As specified in the Magnuson-Stevens Act, EFH consultation is required for federal actions which may adversely affect EFH. As the federal action agency for this matter, NOAA's Restoration Center prepared an EFH assessment and provided that document for our review by electronic mail dated February 26, 2014. The Southeast Region's Habitat Conservation Division (SER HCD) has reviewed the EFH assessment and finds the Restoration Center adequately evaluated potential project impacts to the federally managed species occurring within the influence of the project. We concur with the EFH assessment that permanent impacts to soft bottom EFH will occur; however, the provision of new hard structure in the Gulf may also create benefits to some species managed under the Magnuson-Stevens Act by providing foraging habitat, cover, and conditions favorable for encrusting benthic colonization. The SER HCD has no EFH conservation recommendations to provide pursuant to Section 305(b)(2) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act at this time. Further consultation on this matter is not necessary unless future modifications are proposed and such actions may result in adverse impacts to EFH.

cc:
F/SER-Giordano
F/HC3-Schubert
F/SER4-Dale
F/SER46-Thompson