FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT for the Chenier Ronquille Barrier Island Restoration Project (BA-76) in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Administrative Order 216-6 (May 20, 1999) contains criteria for determining the significance of the impacts of a proposed action. In addition, the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations at Title 40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Section 1508.27 state that the significance of an action should be analyzed both in terms of "context" and "intensity." Each criterion listed below is relevant to making a finding of no significant impact (FONSI) and has been considered individually, as well as in combination with the others. The proposed action, the preferred alternative identified in the enclosed environmental assessment (EA), is building dune and marsh along the Chenier Ronquille shoreline utilizing an identified offshore borrow area that contains appropriate construction material. The significance of this action is analyzed based on the NOAA Administrative Order (NAO) 216-6 criteria and CEQ's context and intensity criteria and is specific to the proposed action based on the evaluation of alternatives in the supporting EA, hereby incorporated by reference. These criteria include:

(1) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to cause substantial damage to the ocean and coastal habitats or essential fish habitat as defined under the Magnuson Stevens Act and identified in Fishery Management Plans (FMPs)?

> Response: No, the proposed action will not cause substantial damage to ocean and coastal habitats or essential fish habitat (EFH) as defined under the Magnuson Stevens Act and identified in FMPs. Although some temporary adverse impacts will occur during construction, they are not substantial and will result in lasting benefits to coastal habitats and EFH. The NOAA Fisheries Habitat Conservation Division is charged with review of federal projects pursuant to the Magnuson-Stevens Act and has determined that the action presents no significant threat to EFH or managed species and NMFS has determined that the proposed action will enhance existing habitat. Some types of EFH that are abundant in the northern Gulf of Mexico (such as open water) will be converted to less common types of EFH (emergent marsh and estuarine sand waterbottoms) critical to juveniles of some estuarine-dependent managed species, including brown shrimp, white shrimp, and red drum. Short-term, unavoidable, adverse impacts to habitats supportive of various life stages of brown shrimp, white shrimp, and red drum would occur during the construction phase of the proposed project as marsh is filled and created. Approximately 365 acres of dune, marsh and shallow open water are currently present in the project area. Within this area, approximately 97 acres of degrading marsh will be affected during construction of the 240 acres of restored marsh. The proposed action will increase the longevity of these quality habitats, and offset the adverse impacts. Without action, approximately 308 less acres of coastal habitats are projected to be available in 20 years.
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> Short-term adverse minor impacts to EFH will result from dredging. Turbidity and disturbance of the benthic habitat will increase during dredging, affecting shallow

EFH for managed species. However, turbidity is naturally high in these shallow open water areas. Natural sedimentation rates are expected to fill the borrow areas in the northern Gulf of Mexico to pre-dredging bathymetric contours. Managed species can readily relocate to the hundreds of thousands of acres of similar substrate available nearby.

(2) Can the proposed action be expected to have a substantial impact on biodiversity or ecosystem function within the affected area (for example, benthic productivity, predator-prey relationships, and similar factors)?

Response: No, the project will not have a substantial adverse impact on ecosystem function or species biodiversity within the affected area. Positive effects are expected to be moderate. The project is designed to approximate naturally occurring marsh and stream bank conditions along the Louisiana coast, which will increase the biological productivity and diversity of the site. Native plant species will be planted to mimic naturally occurring dune and marsh, and would increase diversity. Tidal channels generally develop naturally within the marsh after consolidation and settlement; gapping of retention dikes will be conducted if natural settlement and erosion are not sufficient to provide quality fisheries (edge) habitat and enhance fisheries ingress and egress.

(3) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to have a substantial adverse impact on public health or safety?

Response: No, the project will not have a substantial adverse impact on public health or safety. The project location is remote, accessible only by boat and used primarily for recreational fishing. During construction, some noise and exhaust fumes would create a temporary localized disturbance, but not a hazard to human health or safety.

Dredging activities have the potential to rupture or damage existing oil and gas infrastructure (pipelines, wellheads, etc.) that could result in an oil spill and potentially a natural gas explosion. Oil spills and/or natural gas explosions are the most reasonable serious impacts to public health and safety from the proposed action. Surveys to identify any unmarked pipelines will be required of the contractor prior to dredging and five potential abandoned well locations that have already been identified will be avoided during construction to further minimize the likelihood.

(4) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to adversely affect endangered or threatened species, their critical habitat, marine mammals, or other non-target species?

Response: No, the project is not likely to adversely affect any federal or state listed species. Although temporary adverse impacts limited to the construction phase may occur to individuals, these impacts are not expected to be biologically significant or adversely affect any populations. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

(FWS) and NOAA coordinated avoidance measures of the proposed action that will limit or avoid adverse effect on federally proposed or listed endangered or threatened species that could occur within the project area. NOAA has concluded informal Section 7 consultation with FWS under the Endangered Species Act, specific to the piping plover. As a result, NOAA has received FWS concurrence with NOAA's determination that the proposed action is not likely to adversely affect federally listed species, including the piping plover. Consultation with NOAA Fisheries' SERO for ESA was completed through issuance of the Clean Water Act permit for the preferred alternative. SERO determined that there was no designated critical habitat in the action area, and concurred in the Corps' determination that the project as proposed was not likely to adversely affect listed sea turtles. SERO also recommended additional construction conditions and measures that the Corps incorporated as special conditions to the permit. No other non-target species will be adversely impacted.

(5) Are significant social or economic impacts interrelated with natural or physical environmental effects?

Response: No significant adverse social or economic impacts are interrelated with natural or physical environmental effects of the proposed action. The human environment will benefit minimally from construction-related economic activity and from enhanced opportunities for recreational and commercial fishing, but these effects will not be significant.

(6) Are the effects on the quality of the human environment likely to be highly controversial?

Response: No, it has been determined that the project will have no substantial adverse effects on the quality of the human environment and thus is not likely to generate high levels of controversy. Restoring the dune and marsh will improve the human environment. The proposed action was selected to be designed by the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act (CWPPRA) Task Force through a publicly vetted process. Federal, state, and local government agencies have had the opportunity to review and comment on the proposed action since its inception. No substantial dispute exists as to the project's size, nature, or effect. NOAA's review of the environmental impacts of the project, including comments provided by other resource agencies, did not raise substantial questions as to whether the project would cause significant degradation of the human environment.

(7) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to result in substantial impacts to unique areas, such as historic or cultural resources, park land, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, essential fish habitat, or ecologically critical areas?

Response: No, the project cannot be reasonably expected to have a substantial adverse impact on historic or cultural resources, park land, prime farmlands,

wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, EFH, or ecologically critical areas because no prime farmlands, parklands, or wild and scenic rivers exist on the site or in the limited area of the project's impact. The proposed action would have a beneficial effect on wetland habitat, essential fish habitat, and ecologically critical areas. The intent of the project is to restore a highly degraded shoreline. There will be localized, short-term adverse impacts to fish and wetlands habitat that will be non-significant. There will be long-term localized ecological benefits that result from restoration of habitat as a result of the proposed action.

The State Historic Preservation Office was consulted under National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 and determined that the project will have no adverse effect on cultural or historic resources. There are no submerged cultural sites identified within the construction area, potential cultural resources in the vicinity of the borrow area will be avoided, and thus no impacts are expected.

(8) Are the effects on the human environment likely to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks?

Response: No, the proposed action is similar to other completed marsh restoration projects in Louisiana during the past several years. The project involves risks that are understood and avoidable. Lessons learned on previous projects are propagated throughout the CWPPRA program through meetings of the technical committees and work groups, and the project sponsor participates in these meetings.

(9) Is the proposed action related to other actions with individually insignificant, but cumulatively significant, impacts?

Response: No, the proposed action will not contribute to any cumulatively significant impacts. The proposed action is part of a regional effort to restore and protect wetlands across coastal Louisiana. Every individual project creates temporary, localized adverse effects on existing habitat, but these are not cumulatively significant and results in the long-term beneficial addition of valuable elevation to the coast. Collectively, barrier island restoration projects contribute positively to an ecosystem by providing additional sediment into the system. These sediments then become available to help nourish and sustain the island and provide protected waters.

(10) Is the proposed action likely to adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources?

Response: No, all potential cultural resources, identified by a Phase One survey of the proposed borrow area, will be avoided during dredging. Upon review of the above investigations, the State Historic Preservation Officer determined that the project will have no adverse effect on cultural or historic resources.

(11) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to result in the introduction or spread of a non-indigenous species?

Response: No, the action will not result in the introduction or spread of non-indigenous species but instead may result in their reduction. The proposed action is habitat restoration that will increase the functional value of the barrier island thereby supporting native dune and marsh species. Native plant species will be used to stabilize the soil and increase plant diversity.

(12) Is the proposed action likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represent a decision in principle about a future consideration?

Response: No, the proposed action will not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. This project is a stand-alone project with no identifiable funding for future action beyond the scope and funding currently allocated for the proposed action. Any additional proposed restoration action in this area would need to compete for CWPPRA, or any other, funds and the potential environmental impacts of any additional proposed restoration would be independently evaluated.

(13) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to threaten a violation of federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment?

Response: No, the proposed project has been planned and coordinated to comply with all applicable environmental protection laws, and no violations are likely or expected. In addition, the project will be implemented in compliance with all permits and other authorizations required by the state and federal regulatory agencies.

(14) Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to result in cumulative adverse effects that could have a substantial effect on the target species or non-target species?

Response: No, the proposed action will not result in a substantial cumulative adverse effect on target species or non-target species. The primary goal of this restoration project is to preserve a fragmented shoreline, thereby maintaining the functional value of EFH and other habitat in the vicinity that would decrease without the proposed action. As such, the net effects are incrementally beneficial.

DETERMINATION

In view of the information presented in this document and the analysis contained in the supporting EA prepared for the Chenier Ronquille Barrier Island Restoration Project (BA-76) in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, it is hereby determined that the proposed action identified for implementation will not result in direct, indirect, or cumulative significant impacts on the quality of the human environment. In addition, all beneficial and adverse impacts of the proposed action have been fully considered and evaluated to reach the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). Accordingly, preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement for this action is not necessary.

11/23/13

Frederick C. Sutter
Director
Office of Habitat Conservation
National Marine Fisheries Service
NOAA

Date