



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

**NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE**

Southeast Regional Office

263 13th Avenue South

St. Petersburg, Florida 33701-5505

<http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov>

January 30, 2015

F/SER47: KH/pw

(Sent via Electronic Mail)

Lt. Col. John Litz, Commander  
Charleston District, Corps of Engineers  
69A Hagood Avenue  
Charleston, South Carolina 29403-5107

Attention: Stephen Brumagin

Dear Colonel Litz:

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) reviewed joint public notice SAC-2011-00311-DS dated January 16, 2015. The South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) requests authorization from the Department of the Army to impact approximately 8.1 acres of jurisdictional wetlands, 2981 linear feet of jurisdictional streams, and 0.35 acres of open waters from cut-fill activities in Florence County associated with improvements to a 24.2-mile segment of SC-51 (Pamplico Highway). The Charleston District has determined the proposed work is not within areas designated essential fish habitat (EFH). NMFS agrees with this determination and offers no comments under the authorities of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. As the nation's federal trustee for the conservation and management of marine, estuarine, and anadromous fishery resources, the following comments and recommendation are provided pursuant to authorities of the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act.

The SCDOT proposes to widen a 24.2 mile long segment of SC-51 from a location just south of the intersection of SC-51 and S-57 (Claussen Road) to the intersection of SC-51 with US-378 in Florence County. Proposed improvements include constructing a five-lane roadway that includes four 12-foot-wide travel lanes with a single 15-foot-wide center turn lane/median, and two 10-foot-wide shoulders (each shoulder includes 2 feet of paving and 8 feet of grass shoulder). Additionally, the proposed project would upgrade road crossings over Willow Creek and Little Swamp Creek from culvert crossings to bridge crossings. The proposed action would improve safety and traffic flow by adding roadway capacity, as well as enhancing connectivity to the Pee Dee region and Florence County. The proposed widening and intersection improvements are needed to provide a safe and efficient transportation network for the traveling public and for existing manufacturing and distribution companies in the region.

The public notice describes 8.1 acres of jurisdictional wetlands that would be impacted during the proposed project including palustrine emergent and palustrine unconsolidated bottom. These communities experience seasonal to permanent inundation where overbank flooding occurs in the project area. Bald cypress, tupelo, American sycamore, river birch, sweetgum, and red maple



dominate the canopy. The ground and water surface layers are comprised of arrow arum, cattail, rush, and other common emergent vegetation. The loss of freshwater wetlands could adversely affect water quality as this habitat filters pollutants, stabilizes riparian shorelines, and facilitates transport of organic material. Consideration of the losses to these habitats and the ecosystem services they provide is essential during all phases of construction.

The public notice also describes direct impacts to 2981 linear feet of jurisdictional streams and 0.35 acres of open waters that would permanently eliminate and temporarily disturb aquatic habitats as well as temporarily disrupt the behavior of aquatic organisms during construction. Additional downstream impacts must also be considered during all aspects of the proposed construction. Big Swamp Creek is a direct tributary of the Lynches River, which flows into the Great Pee Dee River. The Great Pee Dee River then broadens and establishes estuarine characteristics as it flows into Winyah Bay, which supports both commercial and recreational fisheries.

Big Swamp Creek, the Lynches River, and the Great Pee Dee (Pee Dee) River are spawning areas for anadromous fish, including American shad and blueback herring. The public notice does not describe potential adverse impacts to anadromous fish species or their habitats. Sediment input into streams and rivers is a major threat to anadromous fish and their habitats. This input can directly impact individuals and large spawning aggregations as well as permanently eliminate migration and spawning habitat. Additionally, impacts from noise, vibrations, and other elements associated with in-water work can adversely affect anadromous fish spawning and migratory patterns and behavior.

As compensatory mitigation for unavoidable impacts to jurisdictional wetlands, streams and open waters, SCDOT proposes to debit 93.1 wetlands credits and 14,667.8 stream credits from the Lynches River Mitigation site. Mitigation through the Lynches River Mitigation site for this project is acceptable to NMFS provided adequate credits are available, success criteria are met, and the methods and implementation are consistent with the Charleston District's compensatory mitigation process.


#### *Recommendation*

NMFS recommends the permit allow neither dredging nor filling in Big Swamp Creek within the project boundaries from March 1 through May 31 to reduce negative effects to American shad and blueback herring and associated anadromous fish spawning areas.

NMFS also recommends the permit require Best Management Practices (BMPs) throughout all phases of construction, including ensuring all efforts are made to avoid toxicant input into surface waters and wetlands, and the use of Sediment Control Fence (SCF) to avoid sediment input into project-adjacent waters and wetlands. Furthermore, rigorous and regular inspections and timely maintenance of all BMPs, including SCF, is essential to avoid sediment and toxicant input into project-adjacent waters and to prevent other potential impacts.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments. NMFS is available to aid SCDOT as the project progresses. Related questions or comments should be directed to the attention of Keith M. Hanson at our Charleston Area Office, 219 Fort Johnson Road, Charleston, South Carolina 29412-9110, Keith.Hanson@noaa.gov or by phone at (843)762-8622.

Sincerely,



/ for

Virginia M. Fay  
Assistant Regional Administrator  
Habitat Conservation Division

cc:

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