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

July 31, 2015 F/SER47:JD/pw

(Sent via Electronic Mail)

Lt. Col. Matthew Luzzatto
Charleston District, Corps of Engineers
69A Hagood Avenue
Charleston, South Carolina 29403-5107

Attention: Debra King

Dear Colonel Luzzatto:

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) reviewed the public notice originally dated July 10, 2015, and re-released on July 22, 2015, for eleven permit applications from DB Astor to construct eleven private recreational docks in Beaufort County[1]. No compensatory mitigation is proposed. The Charleston District's initial determination is construction of these eleven docks would not have substantial individual or cumulative adverse impacts on essential fish habitat (EFH) or federally managed fishery species. As the nation's federal trustee for the conservation and management of marine, estuarine, and anadromous fishery resources, the following comments and recommendations are provided pursuant to authorities of the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act and the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act).

Proposed Project Description
DB Astor proposes to construct eleven private docks so future residents of Bull Point Plantation have access to a tributary of Huspa Creek. The docks would extend from eleven, adjacent, currently undeveloped lots. The dock lengths would vary from 100 to 660 feet depending on the extent of salt marsh present. Each dock would be four feet wide and include a fixed pierhead (10 feet by 12 feet) and a floating boatlift (6 feet by 8 feet).

Essential Fish Habitat in the Project Area
The site of the proposed project includes estuarine emergent wetlands (salt marsh) and subtidal and intertidal non-vegetated flats. The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) identifies these habitats as EFH for penaeid shrimp, including white shrimp (*Litopenaeus setiferus*) and brown shrimp (*Farfantepenaeus aztecus*). Salt marshes are EFH because larvae and juveniles concentrate and feed extensively and shelter within these habitats. As a consequence, growth rates are high and predation rates are low, which makes these habitats effective nursery areas. The SAFMC also identifies salt marsh and tidal creeks as EFH for estuarine-dependent species of the snapper-grouper complex. The SAFMC provides additional

[1] SAC-2015-00759-11W, SAC-2015-00760-11W, SAC-2015-00761-11W, SAC-2015-00762-11W, SAC-2015-00763-11W, SAC-2015-00764-11W, SAC-2015-00765-11W, SAC-2015-00766-11W, SAC-2015-00767-11W, SAC-2015-00768-11W, SAC-2015-00769-11W

detail on EFH and its support of federally managed species in Volume IV of the *Fishery Ecosystem Plan of the South Atlantic Region*[2].

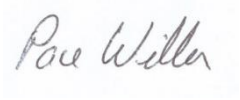
The waters of Huspa Creek, the tidal creeks connected to it, and the surrounding coastal marsh also serve as nursery and forage habitat for other species, such as red drum (*Sciaenops ocellatus*), black drum (*Pogonias cromis*), Atlantic menhaden (*Brevoortia tyrannus*), and blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*). Many of these species are prey for fish managed under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, such as mackerels, snappers, groupers, billfish, and sharks. Red drum is an important state-managed fishery, and estuarine wetlands within the project area provide habitat for several life stages of red drum.

Impacts to Essential Fish Habitat
Cumulatively, the proposed docks would impact 0.36 acres of salt marsh. Adverse impacts to salt marshes from docks include habitat loss within the footprint of support pilings and decreases in vegetation density due to shading. These impacts decrease habitat productivity and function. In addition, construction equipment such as barge mats, can smother vegetation, as has been seen recently in projects along the Folly River and Shem Creek.

The most effective means to address these impacts would be to reduce the number of docks. The NMFS recommends the applicant consider shared docks. The NMFS also recommends the construction use top-down techniques to reduce the need for barge mats. Lastly, the NMFS greatly appreciates the Charleston District including all eleven dock applications into one public notice to facilitate review of cumulative impacts to EFH.

The NMFS appreciates the opportunity to provide these comments. Please direct related correspondence to the attention of Ms. Jaclyn Daly-Fuchs at our Charleston Area Office. She may be reached at (843) 762-8610 or by e-mail at Jaclyn.Daly@noaa.gov.

Sincerely,



/ for

Virginia M. Fay
Assistant Regional Administrator
Habitat Conservation Division

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[2] Available at *safmc.net/EcosystemLibrary/FEPVolumeIV*