



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>

September 25, 2015

F/SER47:FR/pw

(Sent via Electronic Mail)

Colonel Kevin P. Landers, Sr., Commander
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Wilmington District
69 Darlington Avenue
Wilmington, North Carolina 28403-1398

Attention: Tracey Wheeler

Dear Colonel Landers:

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) reviewed the public notice for Action ID No. SAW-2015-01856 dated September 4, 2015. The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) proposes to excavate a channel in Hatteras Inlet, Dare County. The channel would be 3,350 feet by 150 feet and have a depth -12 feet (notice drawings indicate the vertical datum would be mean lower low water, MLLW). To remove the 88,132 cubic yards of material, NCDOT would use a side-casting dredge. The stated purpose of the project is to create deep-water access to allow safe passage in and out of Hatteras Inlet for private and commercial vessels. The Wilmington District's initial determination is the proposed project may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect, essential fish habitat (EFH) or associated fisheries managed by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC), the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, or the NMFS. As the nation's federal trustee for the conservation and management of marine, estuarine, and diadromous fishery resources, the following comments and recommendations are provided pursuant to the authorities of the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act and the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act).

The dredging would disturb approximately 502,500 square feet (11.53 acres) of shallow bottom habitat in a volatile inlet. The amount of habitat affected by the disposal is not known due to the nature of side-cast dredging, but is likely similar to the dredge footprint, bringing the total impact acreage estimate to 23. Although Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV) is not present in the area proposed for excavation and disposal, it is present in nearby areas in Pamlico Sound, as are shallow sub-tidal bottoms.

The SAFMC identifies shallow sub-tidal bottom and SAV in estuarine waters as EFH for brown shrimp, pink shrimp, and white shrimp. The SAFMC also identifies SAV as a habitat area of particular concern (HAPC) for shrimp, gag, and gray snapper. HAPCs are a subset of EFH that are rare, particularly susceptible to human-induced degradation, especially important ecologically, or located in an environmentally stressed area. The SAFMC identifies these areas as EFH because fish and shrimp concentrate in these habitats for feeding and refuge and experience high growth and survival rates when located in these habitats. Detailed information on the EFH requirements of species managed by the SAFMC is provided in a comprehensive amendment to the fishery management plans and *Fishery Ecosystem Plan of the South Atlantic Region*. Other species of commercial or recreational importance found in the project area include red drum, Atlantic croaker, spot, Atlantic menhaden, bay anchovy, striped mullet, weakfish, and blue crab. A number of these species serve as prey for fish that are managed by the SAFMC (e.g., king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, and cobia) or for highly migratory fish managed by the NMFS (e.g., billfishes and sharks).

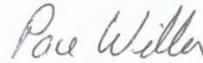


Recommendation

To avoid potential impacts to SAV and shallow sub-tidal bottom, the NMFS recommends NCDOT conduct the dredging on the ebb (falling) tide to increase the likelihood of the sand deposition in the ocean.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments. Please direct related correspondence to the attention of Mr. Fritz Rohde at our Beaufort Field Office, 101 Pivers Island Road, Beaufort, North Carolina 28516-9722, or at (252) 838-0828.

Sincerely,



/ for

Virginia M. Fay
Assistant Regional Administrator
Habitat Conservation Division

cc: COE, Tracey.L.Wheeler@usace.army.mil
USFWS, Pete_Benjamin@fws.gov
NCDCM, Doug.Huggett@ncmail.net, Shane.Staples@ncdenr.gov
EPA, Bowers.Todd@epa.gov
SAFMC, Roger.Pugliese@safmc.net
F/SER4, David.Dale@noaa.gov
F/SER47, Fritz.Rohde@noaa.gov