

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

NATIONAL OCEAN SERVICE

Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Record

FROM: Mary Erickson

Director, National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science

SUBJECT: Categorical Exclusion for Project # RASP15-42 “Defining abnormal events of oceanographic biological and physical properties in the Gulf of Mexico to identify data gaps”

NAO 216-6, Environmental Review Procedures, requires all proposed projects to be reviewed with respect to environmental consequences on the human environment. This memorandum addresses the determination that Project # RASP15-40, “Defining abnormal events of oceanographic biological and physical properties in the Gulf of Mexico to identify data gaps,” qualifies to be categorically excluded from further National Environmental Policy Act review.

**Project Description**

The project will characterize the temporal and spatial variability of physical and biochemical oceanographic parameters in the Gulf of Mexico for a 3 year time period. The investigators will define event driven ecological active regions in the Gulf for both water quality and physical ocean parameters and determine how these conditions can be used to identify data gaps for fisheries and coastal management. Specifically, the investigators will identify the regions in the Gulf where these parameters most often change on a weekly basis using satellite ocean products and ocean circulation models. This will provide a decision support tool for identifying the locations and temporal gaps of presentoceanographic data collection. These active water quality and physical property products will identify ecological “hotspots” for the Northern Gulf of Mexico and can be effectively used as a method of adaptive sample collection by fisheries and coastal managers. The investigators will analyze ocean variability use existing data sets to identify the linkages between fish and nekton along sampling transects and the variability of water quality and physical events. This will enable monitoring activities to target future abnormal events or ecologically active events in the Gulf. In addition, active events showcasing the ocean’s changing conditions will be combined with existing NOAA-Fisheries acoustic data to identify how the higher trophic layers of the ecosystem respond. The products and analyses generated by the investigators will be shared with fisheries and coastal managers for use in decision making and establishing an observation network. The field data required for this project has already been collected. The investigators’ activities (i.e., collecting satellite data products and ocean circulation model outputs and there analysis) will be conducted in an office environment.

**Effects of the Project**

There will be no field work conducted as part of this project. Thus, project actions will not result in cumulative environmental impacts. In addition, the proposed project does not involve air, noise, or water quality impacts; and does not otherwise have a significant impact on the human environment. No activities will be conducted in areas where children may congregate. These activities are not the subject of controversy based on potential environmental consequences and do not establish a precedent or decision in principle about future proposals. There are no uncertain environmental impacts or unknown risks. As there are no field activities there is no impact on geographically or ecologically critical areas, (sanctuaries, wetlands, watersheds), National Historic Sites, and no adverse impacts to marine mammals, essential fish habitat or threatened and endangered species or their critical habitat.

**Categorical Exclusion Determination**

As defined in NAO 216-6, Section 6.03c.3(d), this is an applied research project which can be considered a routine NOAA program function with limited or short-term environmental consequences. As such, it can be categorically excluded from the need to prepare an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement.