UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL OCEAN SERVICE
National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Record

FROM: Margo Schulze-Haugen, Deputy Director

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Date: 2021.05.03 08:55:39 -04'00'

SUBJECT: Categorical Exclusion for information services activities covered by the G4 categorical exclusion

NOAA Administrative Order (NAO) 216-6A, Environmental Review Procedures, requires all proposed projects be reviewed with respect to environmental consequences to the environment. This memorandum addresses the determination that the following activities described below are "office setting only" activities and qualify to be categorically excluded from further National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review, under the G4 categorical exclusion.

Environmental Compliance Approach

To be valid, this memorandum must be accompanied by a signed project specific checklist that confirms the applicability of a specific project under the G4 categorical exclusion. This memorandum alone does not qualify a project to be categorically excluded from further NEPA review.

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Based on this environmental review and the associated project specific checklist, NCCOS determines that these activities qualify to be categorically excluded under the G4 Categorical Exclusion: Defined in the NAO 216-6A Companion Manual; G4 includes basic environmental services and monitoring, such as weather observations, communications, analyses, and predictions; environmental satellite operations and services; digital and physical environmental data and information services; air and water quality observations and analysis, and IT operations. All such activities must be conducted within existing facilities.

Purpose and Need

Coastal communities and resource managers need to balance the inherent trade-offs between resource use and conservation. To make informed decisions, managers need comprehensive information to evaluate the benefits and consequences of actions on both the ecosystem and the community. To meet this need, NCCOS conducts and funds research on the distribution and ecology of marine plants and animals to develop spatially comprehensive characterizations of marine ecosystems in support of marine resource management to aid conservation efforts and to reduce the impact of energy exploration and aquaculture activities on sensitive coastal resources. In addition, NCCOS researchers and grant awardees develop and validate models to provide forecasts to assess and predict the impacts of human uses and natural events, like harmful algae blooms on coastal and marine events. NCCOS research within this category includes but is not limited to activities conducted by the Biogeography Branch, Satellite Oceanography researchers, and the aquaculture program in support of informed aquaculture siting efforts. NCCOS also supports projects funded through the Competitive Research Program and RESTORE Science Programs that use these methods to provide critical information and predictive capabilities to better manage coastal resources in an ecosystem context. Communities, state and Federal stewards, and industries such as aquaculture, offshore energy, and tourism use these spatial characterizations and modeling tools, to make informed coastal management decisions to balance economy prosperity, energy independence, human health and conservation.

Activity Description

Activities covered by this categorical exclusion include the use of existing data (previously collected) from field studies and other surveys to create reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, maps, synthesis reports and support development of interactive decision support tools, predictive models, databases, forecasts and provide information to coastal managers. In addition, resulting model forecasts, products and tools may be used in training workshops to fill data gaps and meet stakeholders and regulators data and information needs. The existing data and products utilize information from estuaries, along the coasts, marine ecosystems and marine protected areas wherever they occur, nationwide

Extraordinary Circumstances and Environmental Statutes

Routine activities described above will be conducted within an office setting, using existing data and infrastructure to synthesize, collate, and compile the existing data to produce predictive models, spatial decision support tools, geodatabases, atlases, species and habitat distribution maps, models, forecasts, etc. There would be no field work or laboratory activities conducted as part of these activities. Thus, there would be no uncertain adverse environmental impacts, unknown risks or cumulative impacts associated with them. Further, the proposed projects would not involve air, noise, or water quality impacts; and would not otherwise have a significant impact on the human environment. 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. In addition, 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. Therefore, this project does not trigger any further consultations for other environmental statutes such as the Endangered Species Act, Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, National Historic Preservation Act or National Marine Sanctuaries Act. No low-income or minority populations would be adversely affected by project activities and there is no potential to contribute to the introduction or spread of a non-native, invasive species. Therefore, there is no requirement for further NEPA review in an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement.