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: Lauren Latchford
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NOAA National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science

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Date: 2025.11.20 13:28:41 -05'00'

SUBJECT: Categorical Exclusion Addendum for RESTORE Science Program Project Renewal: “Oyster, Blue Crab, Southern Flounder, and Spotted Seatrout Population Dynamics in Relation to Environmental Trends and Variability in Coastal Alabama: Phase II, Years 6-10”

NOAA Administrative Order (NAO) 216-6A, Environmental Review Procedures, requires all proposed projects be reviewed with respect to environmental consequences on the human environment. This memorandum addresses the determination that the activities described below for award renewal #NA19NOS4510194, “Oyster, Blue Crab, Southern Flounder, and Spotted Seatrout Population Dynamics in Relation to Environmental Trends and Variability in Coastal Alabama: Phase II, Years 6-10” qualifies to be categorically excluded from further National Environmental Policy Act review.

This project was awarded in 2019 and NEPA analysis was completed. In 2025 the project was renewed for 2026-2030. Because there is no change in project activities, protocol, or action area, and no newly designated ESA-listed species or critical habitat in the project action area, the analysis in the existing CE memo and ESA Section 7 Informal Consultation stand, completing the NEPA analysis requirement for project activities between 2026 and 2030. Project activities will incorporate Best Management Practices described below.

2026-2030 Activities

The project scope builds upon surveys in Mobile Bay conducted between 2019 and 2025 to understand oyster, blue crab, southern flounder, and seatrout population dynamics in relation to environmental trends and variability in Mobile Bay. Analysis led to the quantification and linkage of trends in populations and environmental drivers. Project PIs are requesting additional funds to conduct more surveys to understand the underlying mechanisms that relate long-term trends and short-term variability in the environment to changing populations. Identifying and quantifying these mechanisms will allow fisheries managers to predict how management and restoration activities will benefit these species.

More survey stations within Mobile Bay were added to the sampling plan (Figure 1). Stations will be accessed on a small outboard vessel traveling from the shore to the sampling site. PIs will collect hydrography and water quality data as well as oyster spat prevalence and abundance. Otter trawling will not be conducted as described in the 2019 CE memo. Efforts will focus on analyzing existing data collected through existing monitoring programs.

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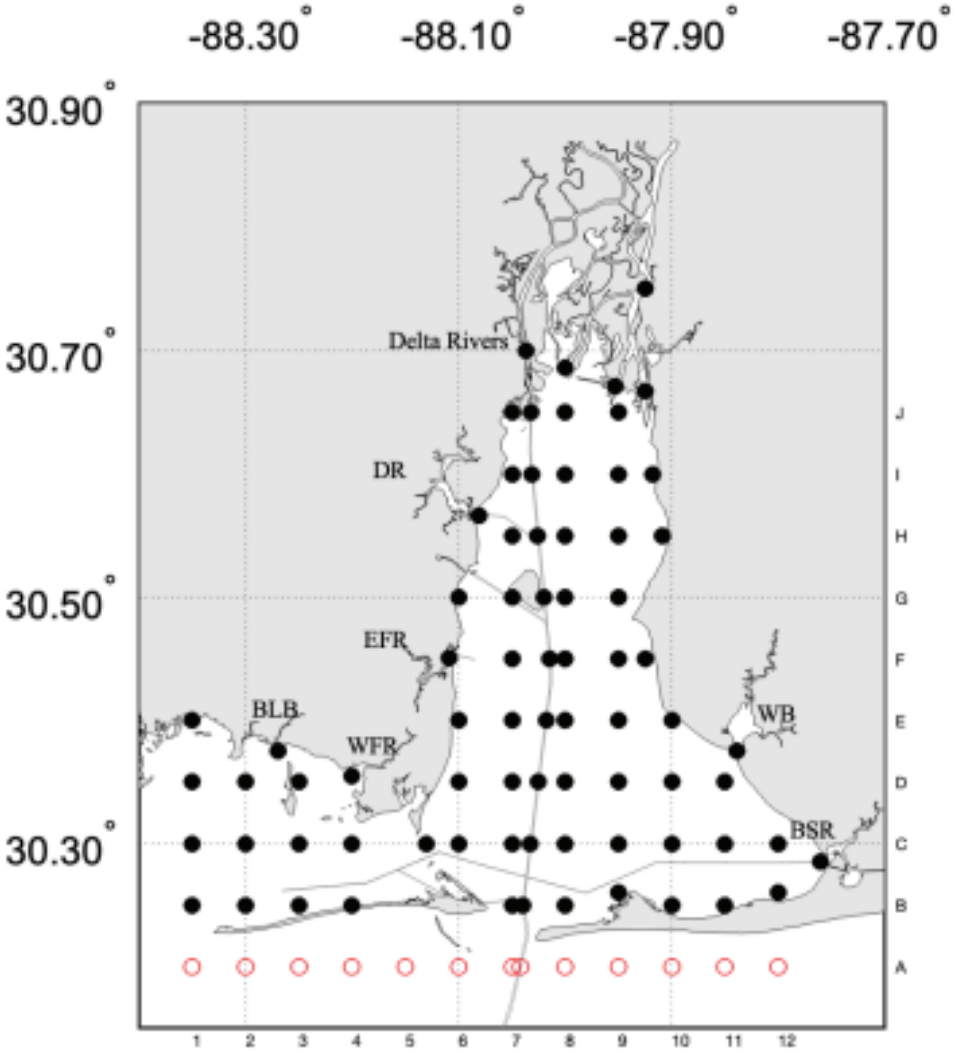

Figure 1: Sampling sites in Mobile Bay designated as black dots. River names are abbreviated as such: Dog River (DR), East Fowl River (EFR), West Fowl River (WFR), Bayou La Batre (BLB), Bon Secour River (BSR) and Weeks Bay (WB). Red dots denote sampling stations located in the ~10m isobath.

Protective Measures and Best Management Practices (BMPs) Incorporated into the Action

In the event of unauthorized incidental take, the RESTORE Science Program would suspend all activities causing such take and immediately contact NMFS Office of Protected Resources (see contact below). The RESTORE Science Program would request ESA Section 7 initiation in the event of unauthorized take, systematic noncompliance, unanticipated adverse effects, or modification of the action.

NMFS POC – Michael Tucker, michael.tucker@noaa.gov, 727-209-5981, NMFS SERO

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All applicable Best Management Practices (BMPs) must be communicated to the principal investigators, boat operators, and field staff in order to explain responsibilities, communication procedures, marine mammal monitoring protocol, and operational procedures.

1. Minimize vessel disturbance and ship strike potential
    a. Reduced speeds (<13 knots) when ESA-listed cetaceans are observed (unless otherwise required, e.g., NOAA Sanctuaries)
    b. Reduced speeds (<13 knots) while transiting through designated critical habitat (unless slower speeds are required, e.g., < 10 knots in Right Whale critical habitat and management areas)
    c. Species identification keys (for marine mammals, sea turtles,– as applicable) will be available on all vessels
2. Minimize noise
    a. Reduced speed (see above)
3. Minimize vessel discharges (including aquatic nuisance species)
    a. Meet all EPA Vessel General Permits and Coast Guard requirements.
    b. Avoid discharge of ballast water in designated critical habitat
    c. Use anti-fouling coatings.
    d. Clean hull regularly to remove aquatic nuisance species (but avoid doing so in critical habitat)
    e. Avoid cleaners with nonylphenols
    f. Rinse the anchor with a high-powered hose after retrieval.
4. Minimize anchor impact to corals, seagrass or other EFH
    a. Use designated anchorage area when available
    b. Avoid anchoring in seagrass critical habitat
    c. Minimize anchor drag
5. Avoid collecting bottom samples in seagrass critical habitat
    a. There will be no bottom sample collections of any kind conducted during this project
6. Cetaceans
    a. Avoid approaching within 200 yards (182.9 m), 500 yards for Right Whales.
    b. Avoid critical habitat, when possible.
7. Sea Turtles and Manatees
    a. Avoid approaching within 50 yards.
    b. Avoid sampling within designated critical habitat for loggerhead sea turtles.
8. Entanglement Protective Measures
    a. Use stiffer line materials for towing and keep taut during operations to reduce potential for entanglement
    b. Reduce knots in the line as much as possible
    c. Clearly mark lines in the event an animal does become entangled so that NMFSexperts can identify the gear
9. Habitat Protection

   a. Avoid unnecessary contact of gear, towed or lowered, with the sensitive bottom habitat (e.g., submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) and hard bottom)

10. Protected Area and State Collecting Permits
    a. Required state collecting permits will be maintained and provided to the Federal Program Officer before field work starts and annually thereafter (as needed) before out-year funds are released.