



BILLING CODE 3510-22-P

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

RTID 0648-XA089

Draft Supplemental Programmatic Environmental Assessment for Fisheries Research Conducted and Funded by the Southwest Fisheries Science Center

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice of availability of a Draft Supplemental Programmatic Environmental Assessment; request for comments.

SUMMARY: NMFS announces the availability of the “Draft Supplemental Programmatic Environmental Assessment (SPEA) for Fisheries Research Conducted and Funded by the Southwest Fisheries Science Center.” Publication of this notice begins the official public comment period for this SPEA. The purpose of this Draft SPEA is to evaluate potential direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of unforeseen changes in research that were not analyzed in the 2015 SWFSC Programmatic Environmental Assessment (PEA), or new research activities along the U.S. West Coast, throughout the Eastern Tropical Pacific Ocean, and in the Scotia Sea area off Antarctica. Where necessary, updates to certain information on species, stock status or other components of the affected environment that may result in different conclusions from the 2015 PEA are presented in this analysis.

DATES: Comments and information must be received no later than [*insert date 30 days after date of publication in the FEDERAL REGISTER*].

ADDRESSES: Comments on the Draft SPEA should be addressed to Elise Kohli, Environmental Compliance Specialist, 8901 La Jolla Shores Drive, La Jolla, CA 92307.

The mailbox address for providing email comments is: nmfs.swfsc.spea@noaa.gov

NMFS is not responsible for email comments sent to addresses other than the one provided here.

Comments sent via email, including all attachments, must not exceed a 10-megabyte file size.

A copy of the Draft SPEA may be obtained by writing to the address specified above, telephoning the contact listed below (see **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT**), or visiting the internet at: fisheries.noaa.gov. Documents cited in this notice may also be viewed, by appointment, during regular business hours at the aforementioned address.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Elise Kohli, email: Elise.Kohli@noaa.gov, phone: (858) 334-2863.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The SWFSC is the research arm of NMFS in the Southwest Region. The purpose of SWFSC fisheries research is to produce scientific information necessary for the management and conservation of living marine resources along the U.S. West Coast in the California Current Ecosystem (CCE), throughout the Eastern Tropical Pacific (ETP) Ocean, and in the Scotia Sea area off Antarctica. SWFSC's research is needed to promote both the long-term sustainability of the resource and the recovery of certain species, while generating social and economic opportunities and benefits from their use. Primary research activities include: mid-water trawl surveys to support assessments of coastal pelagic species, salmon and groundfish in the CCE; longline surveys for life history studies in the CCE and highly migratory species tagging in the CCE; deep-set buoy surveys for tagging highly migratory species in the CCE; ecosystem surveys using active acoustic systems, other oceanographic equipment in the

CCE and ETP; and surveys using unmanned systems in the Antarctic Research Area (ARA) and CCE.

NMFS has prepared the Draft SPEA under NEPA to evaluate several alternatives for conducting and funding fisheries and ecosystem research activities as the primary federal action. Additionally in the Draft SPEA, NMFS evaluates a related action--also called a “connected action” under 40 CFR 1508.25 of the Council on Environmental Quality’s regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of NEPA (42 U.S.C. 4321 *et seq.*)-- which is the proposed promulgation of regulations and authorization of the take of marine mammals incidental to the fisheries research under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Additionally, because the proposed research activities occur in areas inhabited by species of marine mammals, birds, sea turtles and fish listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) as threatened or endangered, this Draft SPEA evaluates activities that could result in unintentional takes of ESA-listed marine species.

The following (2) alternatives are currently evaluated in the Draft SPEA

- No-Action/Status Quo Alternative - Conduct Federal Fisheries and Ecosystem Research with Scope and Protocols Similar to Past Efforts
- Preferred Alternative - Conduct Federal Fisheries and Ecosystem Research (New or Modified Research) with Mitigation for MMPA and ESA Compliance

The alternatives include a program of fisheries and ecosystem research projects conducted or funded by the SWFSC as the primary federal action. Because this primary action is connected to a secondary federal action (also called a connected action under NEPA), to consider authorizing incidental take of marine mammals under the MMPA, NMFS must identify as part of this evaluation “(t)he means of effecting the least practicable adverse impact on the species or

stock and its habitat.”(Section 101(a)(5)(A) of the MMPA [16 U.S.C. 1361 *et seq.*]) NMFS must therefore identify and evaluate a reasonable range of mitigation measures to minimize impacts to protected species that occur in SWFSC research areas. These mitigation measures are considered as part of the identified alternatives in order to evaluate their effectiveness to minimize potential adverse environmental impacts. The three action alternatives also include mitigation measures intended to minimize potentially adverse interaction with other protected species that occur within the action area. Protected species include all marine mammals, which are covered under the MMPA, all species listed under the ESA, and bird species protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Potential direct and indirect effects on the environment are evaluated under each alternative in the Draft SPEA. The environmental effects on the following resources are considered: physical environment, special resource areas, fish, marine mammals, birds, sea turtles, invertebrates, and the social and economic environment. Cumulative effects of external actions and the contribution of fisheries research activities to the overall cumulative impact on the aforementioned resources is also evaluated in the Draft SPEA for the three main geographic regions in which SWFSC surveys are conducted.

NMFS requests comments on the Draft SPEA for Fisheries Research Conducted and Funded by the National Marine Fisheries Service, Southwest Fisheries Science Center. Please include, with your comments, any supporting data or literature citations that may be informative in substantiating your comment.

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 1361 *et seq.*

Dated: May 5, 2020.

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National Marine Fisheries Service.

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