



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
<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/region/southeast>

December 14, 2022 F/SER46/AR:rs
225-380-0081

Bureau of Ocean Energy Management
Dr. Agatha-Marie Kaller, Regional Supervisor
New Orleans Office
1201 Elmwood Park Blvd
New Orleans, Louisiana 70123-2394

Dear Dr. Kaller:

The Bureau of Ocean Energy and Management (BOEM), Gulf of Mexico Office, and the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) are requesting initiation of programmatic consultation on any activity that may adversely affect essential fish habitat (EFH). NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Southeast Region's Habitat Conservation Division has received your letter dated November 7th, 2022 and reviewed the EFH assessment (BOEM-2022-049) for Offshore Wind Lease Issuance, Site Characterization, and the Site Assessment in the Gulf of Mexico (GOM).

The programmatic consultation request addresses the proposed federal actions associated with the following GOM activities: (1) issuance of up to 18 offshore wind energy leases approximately 80,000 acres each and (2) the granting of Rights-of-Use and Easement and Rights-of-Way over a period of ten years; and (3) site assessment and site characterization activities expected to take place after the issuance of commercial and research wind energy leases. The call area includes the state of waters of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, where wind energy-related activities could occur. However, it is assumed that the project area may occur along the coasts of Texas and Louisiana. The site assessment and site characterization activities are expected to begin within one year following execution of a lease and continue intermittently for the following five to seven years leading up to the submittal of a Construction and Operations Plan. The following is provided in accordance with provisions of the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act (16 U.S.C. 661 et seq.) and 600.92 0 of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act; P.L. 104-297).

The habitat types in the vicinity of the project area consists of soft bottom benthic, hard bottom benthic, and pelagic habitats. Water bottoms in the project area are composed of a mixture of sand and mud substrates. The proposed project is in an area designated as EFH for various life stages of federally managed species, including post larval and juvenile stages of white shrimp, pink shrimp, brown shrimp, red drum, red snapper, gray snapper, lane snapper, gray triggerfish, cobia, greater amberjack, king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, scalloped hammerhead shark, blacktip shark, and Atlantic sharpnose shark. In addition to the various corals species found in the GOM, including elkhorn coral, staghorn coral, Caribbean boulder star coral, lobed star coral, mountainous star coral, pillar coral, rough cactus coral, stony branching corals, octocorals, cup



corals, and black corals. The primary categories of EFH affected by project implementation are marine water column and marine water bottom. Detailed information on federally managed fisheries and their EFH is provided in the 2005 Generic Amendment of the Fishery Management Plans for the Gulf of Mexico prepared by the GMFMC and in the 2017 Amendment 10 to the Consolidated Atlantic Highly Migratory Species Fishery Management Plan prepared by NMFS as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

In addition to being designated as EFH for various federally managed fishery species, wetlands, corals, water bottoms, and the water column in the project area provide nursery and foraging habitats for a variety of economically important marine fishery species such as blue crab, gulf menhaden, Atlantic croaker, southern flounder, bay anchovy, and striped mullet. Some of these species serve as prey for other fish species managed by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (e.g., mackerels, snappers, and groupers) and highly migratory species managed by NMFS (e.g., billfishes and sharks).

Based on our review of the EFH assessment and knowledge of the project area, the NMFS anticipates any adverse effects to NOAA trust resources would be minimal. Majority of the impacts during the site characterization and site assessment are expected to occur in the water column and soft bottom habitats. BOEM is expected to use Best Management Practices (BMP) to identify and avoid hard bottoms habitats, habitat areas of particular concern, and other sensitive habitats. BOEM also proposed for the lessee to implement the Marine Debris Protocol for avoiding and mitigating potential impacts to EFH. Consequently, the NMFS does not object to the programmatic federal actions as currently proposed and offers no conservation recommendations pursuant to the EFH provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act or the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act.

We appreciate your coordination with our office on this project. If you wish to discuss this project further or have questions, please contact Alexis Rixner at (225) 380-0081 or by e-mail at Alexis.Rixner@noaa.gov.

Sincerely,



Virginia M. Fay
Assistant Regional Administrator
Habitat Conservation Division

c:
F/SER46, Swafford, Rixner
F/SER1, Silverman, Rosegger
F/SER3, Bethea, Reece
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