UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
Southeast Regional Office
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St. Petersburg, Florida 33701-5505
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March 17, 2014

MEMORANDUM TO: Leslie Craig
Southeast Region Supervisor, NOAA Restoration Center

FROM: Virginia M. Fay
Assistant Regional Administrator, Habitat Conservation Division

SUBJECT: Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) assessment review for the Expansion of the George Vancouver Ship Artificial Reef Project, Offshore from Freeport, Brazoria County, Texas (Freeport Reef Project)

In response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the Freeport Reef Project will compensate for lost recreational use opportunities caused by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill by providing new offshore recreational fishing opportunities. The Freeport Reef Project will increase the amount of reef materials in a currently permitted 160-acre George Vancouver Liberty Ship artificial reef site (BA-336), located within Texas state waters in the Gulf of Mexico, approximately 6 miles offshore of Freeport, Texas, by placing prefabricated concrete pyramids onto sandy substrate at a water depth of 55 feet. Offshore marine water column and marine sand substrates will be impacted and are identified and described as EFH under provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act).

As specified in the Magnuson-Stevens Act, EFH consultation is required for federal actions which may adversely affect EFH. As the federal action agency for this matter, NOAA's Restoration Center prepared an EFH assessment and provided that document for our review by electronic mail dated February 26, 2014. The Southeast Region's Habitat Conservation Division (SER HCD) has reviewed the EFH assessment and finds the Restoration Center adequately evaluated potential project impacts to the federally managed species occurring within the influence of the project. We concur with the EFH assessment that temporary turbidity impacts and permanent impacts to soft bottom EFH will occur; however, the new hard structure may also create benefits to some species managed under the Magnuson-Stevens Act by providing foraging habitat, cover, and conditions favorable for encrusting benthic colonization. The SER HCD has no EFH conservation recommendations to provide pursuant to Section 305(b)(2) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act at this time. Further consultation on this matter is not necessary unless future modifications are proposed and such actions may result in adverse impacts to EFH.

cc:
F/SER-Giordano
F/HC3-Schubert
F/SER4-Dale
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