support to the region (outside payments made to the Compact States of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of Palau).

Other alternatives that may be explored may address non-target, associated and dependent species related to purse seine fishing. Comments on these alternatives, as well as issues and concerns are invited.

Additional Information Available

Information on the text of the Treaty, the authorizing legislation or the associated proposed rule should be sent to the Chief, Division of Consultation, Habitat Conservation Planning, Recovery and State Grants, at the above address (Telephone 703/358–2171, Facsimile 703/358–1735) or Phil Williams, Chief, Endangered Species Division, NMFS, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910 (301/713–1401; facsimile 301/713–0376).

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

In response to several years of catastrophic wildland fires throughout the United States culminating in the particularly severe fire season of 2000, when over 6.5 million acres of wildland areas burned, President Clinton directed the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture to develop a report outlining a new approach to managing wildland fires and restoring fire-adapted ecosystems. The report, entitled Managing the Impact of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment, was issued September 8, 2000. This report set forth ways to reduce the impacts of fires on rural communities, a short-term plan for rehabilitation of fire-damaged ecosystems, and ways to limit the introduction of invasive species and address natural restoration processes. The report, and the accompanying budget requests, strategies, plans, and direction, have become known as the NFP. The NFP is intended to reduce risk to communities and natural resources from wildland fires through rehabilitation, restoration, and maintenance of fire-adapted ecosystems, and by the reduction of accumulated fuels or highly combustible fuels on forests, woodlands, grasslands, and rangelands.

In August 2002, during another severe wildland fire season in which over 7.1 million acres of wildlands burned, President Bush announced the Healthy Forests Initiative. The initiative was intended to accelerate implementation of the fuels reduction and ecosystem restoration goals of the NFP in order to minimize the damage caused by catastrophic wildfires by reducing unnecessary regulatory obstacles that...
have at times delayed and frustrated active land management activities. As part of the initiative, the agencies were tasked with streamlining the section 7 consultation process for projects implementing the NFP.

The Action Agencies published a proposed rule to establish Joint Counterpart Endangered Species Act section 7 regulations on June 5, 2003 (68 FR 33805). The proposed counterpart regulations, authorized in general at 50 CFR 402.04, will provide an optional alternative to the existing section 7 consultation process described in 50 CFR part 402, subparts A and B. The counterpart regulations complement the general consultation regulations in part 402 by providing an alternative process for completing section 7 consultation for agency projects that authorize, fund, or carry out actions that support the NFP.

In the Environmental Assessment, we considered three alternatives that would streamline the consultation process. The Memorandum of Understanding/Programmatic consultation alternative was eliminated from further consideration. The no action alternative would keep the current section 7 consultation process in place. The preferred alternative is to finalize the proposed counterpart regulation. The proposed action is to establish an alternative consultation process that would eliminate the need to conduct informal consultation and eliminate the requirement to obtain written concurrence from the applicable Service for those NFP actions that the Action Agency determines are “not likely to adversely affect” (NLAA) any listed species or designated critical habitat.

Authority: The authority for this action is the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq.).


Julie MacDonald,
Acting Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks.

Julie MacDonald,
Acting Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks.


William T. Hogarth,
Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.

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