



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE

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January 31, 2006

F/SER4:RS/dd

Mr. Keith Jenkins
Naval Facilities Engineering Command Atlantic
Code EV21 KJ
6506 Hampton Boulevard
Norfolk, VA 23508-1278

Dear Mr. Jenkins:

The Southeast Regional Office Habitat Conservation Division of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has reviewed the Department of the Navy Draft Overseas Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) dated October 2005, which describes three alternative sites for a proposed Undersea Warfare Training Range (USWTR). The Navy proposes a 500 square nautical mile sonar training range for anti-submarine warfare training activities to be located off the southeast coast of the United States in the Atlantic Ocean.

Our comments are provided in accordance with the provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) and the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act. Separate comments may be provided by the NMFS Protected Resources Division pursuant to the Endangered Species Act, Marine Mammal Protection Act, and similar authorities.

We are concerned that adverse impacts to living marine resources may be expected to occur that are not fully analyzed in the EIS. Appreciable consideration is given in the EIS on the acoustic affects of the project on marine mammals, however, the EIS concludes that operation of the USWTR would have minimal adverse affects on other fishery resources. Based on coordination with the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (NCDMF) and the NOAA Center for Coastal Fisheries and Habitat Research, the NMFS believes that construction and operation of the USWTR could directly and indirectly impact federally managed fishery species. We are concerned that the USWTR will utilize mid-range sonar (1-10 kHz) with sound broadcast levels (>200 dB) that could influence the behavior and spawning activities of fishes, especially those in the families Sciaenidae (drums and croakers), Carangidae (jacks), and Scombridae (mackerels and tunas). The sonic disturbance from operation of the USWTR would occur in short pings, but would include up to 161 exercise-days per year. Silver perch, a forage species commonly found in the project area, hear sound in the range of 1-4 kHz. The proposed sound levels exceed that produced by fishes themselves (silver perch generate sounds up to 135 dB)¹ and this species'

¹ Sprague, M.W. and Luczkovich, J.J. 2004. Measurement of an individual silver perch *Bairdiella ch* pressure level in a field recording. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 116(5): 3186-3191.



reaction to bottlenose dolphin suggests that they will respond to the sonar by ceasing spawning choruses.² Therefore, we are concerned that operation of the USWTR could adversely impact spawning activity of a variety of benthic and pelagic fishes, including federally managed species that utilize the project area as spawning habitat.

We are also concerned regarding the variety of infrastructure that would be placed on the ocean floor and linked by cables to an upland facility. The EIS includes an essential fish habitat assessment (EFH) that addresses potential impacts of the construction and operation of the USWTR concluding that adverse impacts would be minimal. Although the Navy intends to bury the interconnecting cable it is possible that over time cables could become exposed and scour relatively large areas of ocean floor. Therefore, we are concerned that operation and maintenance of the facility could continuously and cumulatively adversely impact benthic habitats. Hard/live bottoms provide EFH for the snapper-grouper complex managed by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council and for summer flounder, black seabass, and scup managed by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council. Detailed information on federally managed fisheries and their EFH is provided in the 1998 comprehensive amendment of the Fishery Management Plans for the South Atlantic region prepared by the SAFMC. The comprehensive amendment was prepared as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act).

In view of the above, the NMFS recommends that additional analysis be conducted to fully assess the potential impacts of the anticipated acoustic environment and habitat changes on federally and state managed fishery resources. We appreciate the opportunity to provide these comments. Please direct related questions or comments to the attention of Mr. Ronald Sechler, at our Beaufort, North Carolina, location. He may be reached at (252)728-5090.

Sincerely,



/ for

Miles M. Croom
Assistant Regional Administrator
Habitat Conservation Division

cc:
F/SER4
F/SER43
F/SER3

² Luczkovich, J.J. *et al.* 2000. Sounds of sex and death in the sea: Bottlenose dolphin whistles suppress mating choruses of silver perch. *Bioacoustics* 10(4): 323-334.