

applicant of the negative determination with the reasons therefore.

(4) *Final determination and publication of a final rule.* Following public comment, NMFS will approve or disapprove the amendment to the list of gear and fisheries.

(i) If approved, NMFS will publish a final rule in the **Federal Register** and notify the applicant and the Council, if appropriate, of the final approval.

(ii) If disapproved, NMFS will withdraw the proposed rule, notify the applicant and the Council, if appropriate, of the disapproval; publish emergency or interim regulations, if necessary, to prohibit or restrict the use of gear or the participation in a fishery; and either notify the Council of the need to amend an FMP or prepare an amendment to an FMP in the case of Atlantic highly migratory species.

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 622

[I.D. 052698C]

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council; Public Hearings

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

ACTION: Notice of public hearings; request for comments.

SUMMARY: The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) will convene public hearings on the Draft Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Generic Amendment to the Fishery Management Plans (FMP) of the Gulf of Mexico. Public meetings on the NMFS draft EFH recommendations will be held following one of the public hearings.

DATES: Written comments on the Council's draft EFH amendment will be accepted through July 17, 1998. Written comments on NMFS' draft EFH recommendation will be accepted through July 15, 1998.

The public hearings will be held in June and July. See **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION** for specific dates and times of the public hearings.

ADDRESSES: Written comments on the draft amendment should be sent to, and copies of the draft amendment are available from, the Council at the following address: Gulf of Mexico

Fishery Management Council, 3018 U.S. Highway 301, North, Suite 1000, Tampa, FL 33619. Copies of the amendment can be obtained by calling (813) 228-2815.

Written comments on the NMFS draft EFH recommendations should be addressed to: Habitat Conservation Division, NMFS, 9721 Executive Center Drive N., St. Petersburg, FL 33702-2432, Attn: Draft EFH Recommendation to GMFMC. Copies of the draft recommendations can be obtained by calling (813) 570-5317.

Public hearings will be held in Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas. See **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION** for locations of the hearings.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Wayne E. Swingle, Executive Director, Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council; telephone: (813) 228-2815.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The Council will hold public hearings on a draft generic amendment addressing EFH in the Gulf of Mexico; eight public hearings will be held to obtain public comments. The description and identification of EFH is mandated by section 305(b) the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act). The generic EFH amendment that is the subject of these hearings addresses EFH in all seven of the Council's FMPs. The following is a summary of the amendment:

1. EFH is identified and described based on areas where various life stages of 21 selected managed species and the coral complex commonly occur. The selected species are: Shrimp (brown shrimp, *Penaeus aztecus*; white shrimp, *Penaeus setiferus*; pink shrimp, *Penaeus duorarum*); red drum, *Sciaenops ocellatus*; reef fish (red grouper, *Epinephelus morio*; gag grouper, *Mycteroperca microlepis*; scamp grouper, *Mycteroperca phenax*; red snapper, *Lutjanus campechanus*; gray snapper, *Lutjanus griseus*; yellowtail snapper, *Ocyurus chrysurus*; lane snapper, *Lutjanus synagris*; greater amberjack, *Seriola dumerili*; lesser amberjack, *Seriola fasciata*; tilefish, *Lopholatilus chamaeleonticeps*; and gray triggerfish, *Balistes capricus*), coastal migratory pelagic species (king mackerel, *Scomberomorus cavalla*; Spanish mackerel, *Scomberomorus maculatus*; cobia, *Rachycentron canadum*; and dolphin, *Coryphaena hippurus*), stone crab, *Menippe mercenaria*; spiny lobster, *Panulirus argus*; and the coral complex.

2. The selected species represent about a third of the species under

management by the Council.

Collectively, these species commonly occur throughout all of the marine and estuarine waters of the Gulf of Mexico. EFH for the remaining managed species will be addressed in future FMP amendments, as appropriate.

3. EFH is defined as everywhere that the above managed species commonly occur. Because these species collectively occur in all estuarine and marine habitats of the Gulf of Mexico, EFH is separated into estuarine and marine components. For the estuarine component, EFH includes all estuarine waters and substrates (mud, sand, shell, rock, and associated biological communities), including subtidal vegetation (seagrasses and algae) and adjacent intertidal vegetation (marshes and mangroves). In marine waters of the Gulf of Mexico, EFH includes virtually all marine waters and substrates (mud, sand, shell, rock, and associated biological communities) from the shoreline to the seaward limit of the EEZ.

4. Threats to EFH from fishing and nonfishing activities are identified.

5. Options to conserve and enhance EFH are provided and research needs are identified.

6. No management measures and, therefore, no regulations are proposed at this time. Fishing-related management measures to minimize any identified impacts are deferred to future amendments when the Council has the information necessary to decide if the measures are practicable.

NMFS is in the process of developing an EFH recommendation to the Council in accordance with the 1996 amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Act. The NMFS draft EFH recommendation to the Council includes a review and comments on the Council's draft EFH amendment. The NMFS draft EFH recommendation to the Council will be available for public distribution June 8, 1998, and will be available at the Council's public hearings. Copies may be requested from the NMFS Habitat Conservation Division (see **ADDRESSES**). Written comments on the NMFS draft EFH recommendation may be sent to the NMFS Habitat Conservation Division (see **ADDRESSES**). NMFS will hold a public meeting on the NMFS draft EFH recommendations immediately following the Council's June 22, 1998, public hearing in Kenner, LA.

Public hearings will be held from 7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. at all of the following locations:

1. Wednesday, June 17, 1998—
Ramada Airport Inn & Conference

Center, 5303 West Kennedy Boulevard, Tampa, FL 33609.

2. Thursday, June 18, 1998—Holiday Inn Beachside, 3841 North Roosevelt Boulevard, Key West, FL 33040.

3. Monday, June 22, 1998—New Orleans Airport Radisson, 2150 Veterans Boulevard, Kenner, LA 70062.

4. Tuesday, June 23, 1998—J.L. Scott Marine Education Center & Aquarium, 115 East Beach Boulevard, U.S. Highway 90, Biloxi, MS 39530.

5. Wednesday, June 24, 1998—Holiday Inn on the Beach, 365 East

Beach Boulevard, Gulf Shores, AL 36547.

6. Thursday, June 25, 1998—National Marine Fisheries Service Panama City Laboratory, 3500 Delwood Beach Road, Panama City, FL 32408.

7. Tuesday, June 30, 1998—Hobby Airport Hilton, 8181 Airport Boulevard, Houston, TX 77061.

8. Wednesday, July 1, 1998—Port Aransas Library, 700 West Avenue A, Port Aransas, TX 78373.

Special Accommodations

These meetings are physically accessible to people with disabilities. Requests for sign language interpretation or other auxiliary aids should be directed to Anne Alford at the Council (see ADDRESSES) by June 10, 1998.

Dated: May 29, 1998.

Bruce C. Morehead,

Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.

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