

Categorical Exclusion (CE) Evaluation Worksheet

Project Identifier: EX2303

Date Review Completed: 4/10/2023

OAR NEPA Project Lead: Amanda Maxon, Environmental Compliance Specialist, Contractor, NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration and Research

OAR Functional Area: OER

Worksheet File Name: 2023-04-OER-G3-EX2303

Step 1. CE applicability

- 1. Is this federal financial assistance, including via grants, cooperative agreements, loans, loan guarantees, interest subsidies, insurance, food commodities, direct appropriations, and transfers of property in place of money?**

no

- 2. What is the proposed federal action?**

The proposed action is the NOAA's Office of Exploration and Research (OER) to complete a mapping expedition using the NOAA Ship Okeanos Explorer scientific deepwater sonar systems (Kongsberg EM 304 multibeam, Simrad EK60 and EK80 split-beam sonars, Knudsen 3260 Chirp sub-bottom profiler, and Teledyne acoustic Doppler current profilers) and expendable bathythermograph (XBTs). EX2303 Seascape Alaska: Aleutians Exploration 2 (Mapping) will depart from Dutch Harbor, Alaska on June 2, 2023 and will conclude in Kodiak, Alaska on June 20, 2023 for around 19 days at sea. The exact start and end dates may vary by a few days to a few months depending on weather and other logistical considerations.

During EX2303, the proposed actions of the expedition include acoustic exploration mapping operations for areas generally deeper than 200 m in U.S. waters offshore of Alaska and in the high seas. Mapping operations will be conducted at depths between 200 m and 6,000 m. The action demonstrates independent utility and is not connected to any other federal action.

3. Which class of CE in Appendix E of the NAO 216-6A Companion Manual is applicable to this action and why?

- a. G3: Topographic, bathymetric, land use and land cover, geological, hydrologic mapping, charting, and surveying services that do not involve major surface or subsurface land disturbance and involve no permanent physical, chemical, or biological change to the environment.
- b. The topical scope for this action is consistent with the CE number G3 in Appendix E of the Companion Manual to NOAA Administrative Order (NAO) 216-6A: Topographic, bathymetric, land use and land cover, geological, hydrologic mapping, charting, and surveying services that do not involve major surface or subsurface land disturbance and involve no permanent physical, chemical, or biological change to the environment. EX2303 will conduct calibrations of sonars which will involve no permanent physical, chemical, or biological changes to the environment in areas deeper than 200 meters in depth. EX2303 will focus on performing mapping survey operations between Dutch Harbor and Kodiak, Alaska which would not involve surface or land disturbance causing permanent changes to the environment.

Step 2. Extraordinary Circumstances Consideration

4. Would the action result in adverse effects on human health or safety that are not negligible?

The actions of the NOAA Ship Okeanos Explorer will take place in remote deep-sea (>200m) areas located offshore of Alaska with a focus on U.S. waters offshore of Alaska and in the high seas. All operations are underwater and will have no human presence in the area besides those on onboard the EX2303. The vessel will transit through different depths as it moves from the ports of call to the areas of operations in deeper waters. These actions do not involve any procedures or outcomes known to result in impacts on human health and safety.

5. Would the action result in adverse effects on an area with unique environmental characteristics that are not negligible?

While the Okeanos Explorer is operating within the U.S. EEZ where majority of operations would take place, the effects will be negligible as acoustic mapping operations are considered transient and would not cause any permanent impact on the seabed or within the water column. The procedures that are employed when operating acoustic systems impacts are well-documented and would follow the accepted best management practices for all operations onboard the vessel to ensure that the level of impact is below minor to the point of being barely detectable. Expedition operations are planned and reviewed before any actions are taken in order to determine whether there would be the potential for adverse effects on the area.

6. Would the action result in adverse effects on species or habitats protected by the ESA, MMPA, MSA, NMSA, or MBTA that are not negligible?

The activities are not likely to have a negative effect on species or habitats protected by the ESA, MMPA, MSA, NMSA, or MBTA. According to NOAA Fisheries, there are 7 ESA endangered and threatened species found along Alaska. The Okeanos Explorer operations will abide by the Best Management Practices and Mitigation Measures developed in collaboration with the various regulatory and federal agencies to ensure that operations in these sectors would not result in any activities having adverse effects on the species or habitats protected under ESA, MMPA, MSA, NMSA, or MBTA. Mitigation measures and Best Management Practices are provided to the expedition coordinators and the ship before operations are taken to ensure that they are following the actions developed to minimize or limit adverse effects on species or habitats in the proposed action area.

7. Would the action result in the potential to generate, use, store, transport, or dispose of hazardous or toxic substances, in a manner that may have a significant effect on the environment?

The expedition operations will be in compliance with FEC 07 Hazardous Materials and Hazardous Waste Management Requirements for Visiting Scientific Parties (or the OMAO procedure that supersedes it) to ensure generation, use, storage, transport, and disposal of such substances will not result in significant impacts.

8. Would the action result in adverse effects on properties listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, National Historic Landmarks designated by the Secretary of the Interior, or National Monuments designated through the Antiquities Act of 1906; Federally recognized Tribal and Native Alaskan lands, cultural or natural resources, or religious or cultural sites that cannot be resolved through applicable regulatory processes?

The proposed action will not result in adverse or indirect effects that cannot be resolved through applicable regulatory processes since we will not be operating within listed or eligible properties, lands, resources or sites coming under the umbrella of protection referenced above.

9. Would the action result in a disproportionately high and adverse effect on the health or the environment of minority or low-income communities, compared to the impacts on other communities (EO 12898)?

The NOAA Ship Okeanos Explorer will be operating in the remote and offshore areas along Alaska as the EX transits between Dutch Harbor and Kodiak, Alaska during EX2303. There are no communities within or near the geographic scope of the expedition due to activities operating in areas greater than 200 meters in depth. The expedition does not involve actions known or likely to result in adverse impacts on health or the environment of minority or low income communities.

10. Would the action contribute to the introduction, continued existence, or spread of noxious weeds or nonnative invasive species known to occur in the area or actions that may promote the introduction, growth, or expansion of the range of the species?

During EX2303, NOAA Ship Okeanos Explorer will not make landfall in areas other than commercial ports in Dutch Harbor, Alaska and Kodiak, Alaska. The ship and OER mission team will comply with all applicable local and federal regulations regarding the prevention or spread of invasive species. At the completion of every CTD cast, the equipment will be thoroughly rinsed with fresh water and completely dried to prevent spreading organisms from one site to another. Also the Engineering Department aboard the NOAA Ship Okeanos Explorer attends yearly Ballast Management Training in accordance with NOAA Form 57-07-13 NPDES VGP Annual Inspection and Report to prevent the introduction of invasive species.

11. Would the action result in a potential violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for protection of the environment?

OER has taken measures to ensure that any effects on species or habitats protected by the ESA, MMPA, MSA or NMSA meet the definition of negligible. The proposed actions will not result in any Federal, State, or local law violations or requirements imposed for protection of the environment. OER received a ESA Programmatic Letter of Concurrence and Project Design Criteria letter dated March 14, 2022 from the NMFS ESA Interagency Cooperation Division for ESA Section 7 that concurs with OER's determination that the proposed action may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect ESA-listed species and their designated or proposed critical habitat in the action areas. The ESA Programmatic Letter of Concurrence and its Project Design Criteria will be provided in the EX2303 expedition report.

Given the offshore focus of most of our proposed work, it was determined that it is not likely

that we will encounter marine mammals protected under the MMPA, or sea birds protected under the MBTA as they are often found in territorial and state waters. If we did encounter any such protected animals, our impacts would be negligible because of the best management practices that were developed with relevant agencies that we adhere to avoid or minimize environmental impacts. These best management practices and project designed criteria are outlined in the FY23 Field Season Instructions.

OER requested a Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) consultation under section 304 of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act for expeditions conducted by the NOAA Ship Okeanos Explorer during its 2023 field season in the North Pacific Ocean, Eastern Pacific Ocean, Central Pacific Ocean, and Alaska. The EFH Letter of Acknowledgement was received on August 3, 2022 from the Assistant Regional Administrator for the NOAA Office of Habitat Conservation stating that the FY23 expeditions will not adversely impact EFH. This letter will additionally be included in the EX2303 expedition report.

12. Would the action result in highly controversial environmental effects?

No, the exploration activities are considered small and minimal following the best available information about effects of the equipment to support determination that activities would be localized and be short in duration in any particular area at any given time with no notable or lasting changes to the environment. Given the project's scope and breath, no notable or lasting changes or highly controversial effects to the environment by mapping operations conducted onboard the Okeanos Explorer. Any effects would be small and considered minimal as the vessel transits through the area of interest continuously using acoustic sound sources which have been analyzed to determine the effects that may occur during operations.

13. Does the action have the potential to establish a precedent for future action or an action that represents a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects?

The decision to take this action will not result in growth-inducing changes, compel future actions with potential impacts, or foreclose options for future actions. Each expedition is independently useful and is not connected to subsequent federal actions.

14. Would the action result in environmental effects that are uncertain, unique, or unknown?

The techniques and equipment used are standard for this type of field study, and the effects are well known and assessed to determine whether the actions may result in environmental effects that are uncertain, unique, or unknown.

15. Does the action have the potential for significant cumulative impacts when the proposed action is combined with other past, present and reasonably foreseeable future actions, even though the impacts of the proposed action may not be significant by themselves?

The techniques and equipment used are standard for this type of field study, and the effects are well known and assessed to determine whether the actions may result in environmental effects that are uncertain, unique, or unknown.

CE Determination

☐ I have determined that a Categorical Exclusion is the appropriate level of NEPA analysis for this action and that no extraordinary circumstances exist that would require preparation of an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement.

☐ I have determined that an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement is required for this action.

OAR Decision Maker's Name: David Turner *David Turner* May, 1, 2023

OAR Decision Maker's Position/Title: Acting Deputy Director, NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration and Research (OER)

Date Signed: