



Environmental Assessment for NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service, Office of Protected Resources Coordination and Continued Operation of the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

I. Purpose of Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI): The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for any proposal for a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. 42 U.S.C. § 4332(C). NOAA's Companion Manual for NAO 216-6A, directs agency staff to prepare a FONSI when the analysis shows that the impacts of the proposed action would not be significant.

In preparing this FONSI, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) reviewed the Environmental Assessment (EA) for action, NMFS Office of Protected Resources Coordination and Continued Operation of the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network (STSSN), which evaluates the affected area, the scale and geographic extent of the proposed action, and the degree of effects on resources (including the duration of impact, type, and whether the impacts were adverse and/or beneficial and their magnitude). The EA is hereby incorporated by reference.

II. Approach to Analysis:

NMFS' proposed action is the formalized continued operation of the STSSN under the coordination of NOAA NMFS OPR and the publication of the Final STSSN Operations Procedures Handbook. The proposed activities considered in this EA are limited to OPR's coordination role, activities NMFS OPR staff will conduct in the field related to stranding coordination, response, and mortality investigation, and direct takes of sea turtles while responding to stranding incidents that have occurred because of human activity or natural causes of illness, injury or mortality. Incidental takes are not authorized for the STSSN.

The purpose of NMFS' proposed action is to facilitate ongoing and improved stranding response and communication with the goal of reducing morbidity and mortality in order to achieve conservation and recovery of listed sea turtles. Additionally, this action will maintain NMFS compliance with the 2015 Memorandum of Understanding with USFWS.

The need for NMFS' Proposed Action is to meet NMFS obligations under Section 4(f) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), which provides for the creation of Recovery Plans and provides NMFS and USFWS with authority "to procure the services of appropriate public and private agencies and institutions and other qualified persons" in order to implement those plans. The Recovery Plan for each species of sea turtle identifies and highlights the need to maintain an active stranding network.

The activities conducted by the STSSN provide a positive benefit to individual sea turtles by providing aid to injured, entangled, or sick turtles so that they may be released back into the environment. Mortality and serious injury are not anticipated due to the actions of the STSSN or the overarching coordination by NOAA/NMFS. Response to live stranded sea turtles has the potential to elicit short-term stresses on the individual turtle that are not likely to result in long-term effects on these individuals, populations or species. Therefore, NMFS does not expect the STSSN activities to result in more than short-term effects on individual animals. In addition, NMFS does not expect any delayed mortality of turtles following their release as a direct result of the proposed activities.

The continued implementation of a coordinated STSSN has long-term beneficial effects for sea turtles that are rescued, rehabilitated, and returned to the environment. The actions are therefore not likely to appreciably reduce the numbers, distribution, or reproduction of green, hawksbill, Kemp's ridley, leatherback, loggerhead, or olive ridley sea turtles in the wild that would appreciably reduce the likelihood of survival and recovery of these species. Based on the analysis herein, impacts within the action area as a result of the proposed action are not expected to be significant. NMFS believes that the proposed action would not have a significant cumulative effect on either the physical or biological environments when combined with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. The proposed action is directed at sea turtle recovery and would not have a significant cumulative effect on non-target species or the physical environment in the proposed study area when combined with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions.

III. Geographic Extent and Scale of the Proposed Action:

The Action Area for the proposed action includes the coastal and marine areas of the U.S. Atlantic, Gulf of America, and U.S. Caribbean Territories. All activities will occur in coastal and marine areas, or at existing NMFS facilities.

IV. Degree of Effect:

A. The potential for the proposed action to threaten a violation of federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for environmental protection.

The proposed action would not result in any violation of federal, state, or local laws for environmental protection. This action does not change STSSN partners responsibility for obtaining other permits or complying with other federal, State, local, or international laws or regulations, if necessary and required.

B. The degree to which the proposed action is expected to affect public health or safety.

The proposed action is not expected to have substantial adverse impacts on public health or safety because the action, continued operation of the STSSN under OPR and through use of the STSSN Operating Procedures Handbook, would not change the current practices of STSSN responders. There is minimal potential for exposure to disease for human responders, if basic stranding protocols are followed. Responders will be trained accordingly in safety and proper response techniques to reduce safety concerns as much as possible when responding to sea turtles.

C. *The degree to which the proposed action is expected to affect a sensitive biological resource, including:*

a. *Federal threatened or endangered species and critical habitat;*

The activities conducted by the STSSN provide a positive benefit to individual sea turtles by providing aid to injured, entangled, or sick turtles so that they may be released back into the environment. Mortality and serious injury are not anticipated due to the actions of the STSSN or the overarching coordination by NOAA/NMFS. Response to live stranded sea turtles has the potential to elicit short-term stresses on the individual turtle that are not likely to result in long-term effects on these individuals, populations, or species. Therefore, NMFS does not expect the STSSN activities to result in more than short-term effects on individual animals. In addition, NMFS does not expect any delayed mortality of turtles following their release as a direct result of the proposed activities.

Individual response actions consist of direct, minor, and short-term impacts to the individual sea turtle. Overall the action will have moderate and long-term beneficial impacts to both the individual and the species. Additionally, the proposed action is not expected to impact any designated Critical Habitat for any sea turtle species.

b. *Stocks of marine mammals as defined in the Marine Mammal Protection Act;*

The proposed action would not affect any species of marine mammals as defined in the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Please see **Table 1 of the EA** for a full list of Elements of the human environment not evaluated.

c. *Essential fish habitat identified under the Magnuson–Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act;*

The proposed action would not affect any designated essential fish habitat (EFH). Please see **Table 1 of the EA** for a full list of Elements of the human environment not evaluated.

d. *Bird species protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act;*

The proposed action does not, in and of itself, affect bird species protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Please see **Table 1 of the EA** for a full list of Elements of the human environment not evaluated.

e. *National marine sanctuaries or monuments;*

National marine sanctuaries or monuments would not be affected by the proposed action. Thus, national marine sanctuaries or monuments are not included in the

analysis because they are not associated with the proposed action. Please see **Table 1 of the EA** for a full list of Elements of the human environment not evaluated.

f. Vulnerable marine or coastal ecosystems, including, but not limited to, shallow or deep coral ecosystems;

The nature of the proposed action is such that it would not result in effects to these areas or resources. Please see **Table 1 of the EA** for a full list of Elements of the human environment not evaluated.

g. Biodiversity or ecosystem functioning (e.g., benthic productivity, predator-prey relationships, etc.)

The proposed action would not interfere with benthic productivity, predator-prey interactions, or other biodiversity or ecosystem functions.

D. The degree to which the proposed action is reasonably expected to affect a cultural resource: properties listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places; archeological resources (including underwater resources); and resources important to traditional cultural and religious tribal practice.

The proposed action would allow for the continued operation of the STSSN, and would not result in significant impacts to unique areas, such as historic or cultural resources, parkland, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, EFH, or ecologically critical areas.

E. The degree to which the proposed action has the potential to have 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).

NMFS does not expect the proposed action to disproportionately affect minority and low-income communities. There would be no significant social or economic impacts interrelated with significant natural or physical environmental effects.

F. The degree to which the proposed action is likely to result in effects that 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.

The proposed action would not introduce any species; therefore, it would not result in the introduction or spread of a non-indigenous species.

G. The potential for the proposed action to cause an effect to any other physical or biological resources where the impact is considered substantial in magnitude (e.g., irreversible loss of coastal resource such as marshland or seagrass) or over which there is substantial uncertainty or scientific disagreement.

The proposed action is neither expected to cause a substantial effect to any other physical or biological resource nor is there substantial uncertainty or scientific disagreement on the impacts of the proposed action. NMFS expects any potential effects from the continued operation of the STSSN under the direction of NOAA NMFS OPR to be

similar to prior STSSN activities, which are not likely to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

V. Other Actions Including Connected Actions: The proposed action and other individually insignificant actions would not result in cumulatively significant impacts. NMFS believes that the proposed action would not have a significant cumulative effect on either the physical or biological environments when combined with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. The proposed action is directed at sea turtle recovery and would not have a significant cumulative effect on non-target species or the physical environment in the proposed study area when combined with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions.

VI. Mitigation and Monitoring:

The proposed action does not include any mitigation measures or monitoring. The activities conducted by the STSSN provide a positive benefit to individual sea turtles by providing aid to injured, entangled, or sick turtles so that they may be released back into the environment. Mortality and serious injury are not anticipated due to the actions of the STSSN or the overarching coordination by NOAA/NMFS. Response to live stranded sea turtles has the potential to elicit short-term stresses on the individual turtle that are not likely to result in long-term effects on these individuals, populations or species. Therefore, NMFS does not expect the STSSN activities to result in more than short-term effects on individual animals. In addition, NMFS does not expect any delayed mortality of turtles following their release as a direct result of the proposed activities.

DETERMINATION

NOAA's Companion Manual for NAO 216-6A, directs agency staff to prepare a FONSI when the agency, based on the Environmental Assessment for the proposed action, determines not to prepare an EIS because the action will not have significant effects. In view of the information presented in this document and the analysis contained in the supporting EA, it is hereby determined that NMFS OPR's coordination and continued operation of the STSSN Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network and the finalization of the STSSN Operating Procedures Handbook will not significantly impact the quality of the human environment. The Environmental Assessment for this action is hereby incorporated by reference. Accordingly, preparation of an EIS for this action is not necessary.

For Kimberly Damon-Randall
Director, Office of Protected Resources

Date