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Decision Document for the Identification of Aquaculture Opportunity Areas in U.S. Federal Waters of the Gulf of America Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement
(PEIS-006-48-1SE-1731733032)

This decision document was developed by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) in compliance with decision-making requirements, pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended, and documents NMFS' decision regarding the proposed action.

I. Description of Action

The Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (FPEIS) identifies one or more locations, referred to as Aquaculture Opportunity Areas or AOAs, that may be suitable for multiple future offshore aquaculture operations in U.S. federal waters in the Gulf of America (Gulf) and evaluates the general potential impacts associated with siting aquaculture in those locations in the future. The AOAs identified through this comprehensive planning process are considered potentially suitable for finfish, shellfish, macroalgae, or multi-species aquaculture. The identification of AOAs supports long-term planning for marine aquaculture development in federal waters of the Gulf and may be used to inform permitting, consultation, and review processes for future aquaculture operations, which may lead to efficiencies in these processes. It does not support a specific regulatory or permitting action and does not authorize or permit any specific aquaculture-related activities or individual projects.

The purpose of the proposed action is to apply a science-based approach to identify AOAs in federal waters. The goal of identifying AOAs is to promote American seafood competitiveness, food security, economic growth, and support the development of domestic commercial aquaculture, while sustaining and conserving marine resources, consistent with applicable laws, regulations, and policies. The proposed action is needed to meet the directives of E.O. 13921, to address the increasing demand for seafood; facilitate long-term planning for marine aquaculture development; and address interests and concerns regarding offshore marine aquaculture siting.

NMFS prepared the FPEIS to comply with Executive Order (E.O.) 13921, *Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth* and NEPA. The FPEIS was prepared in accordance with the June 2025 NOAA Policy and Procedures for Compliance with the National



Environmental Policy Act and Related Authorities, Companion Manual for NOAA Administrative Order 216-6A. NMFS developed the FPEIS with the assistance of several federal cooperating and participating agencies. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and Department of the Air Force (DAF) served as cooperating agencies, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), and U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) provided technical assistance, but did not serve as cooperating agencies for the FPEIS. Agencies may use the FPEIS to inform the permitting and environmental review of future aquaculture operations proposed in an AOA. NMFS considered and analyzed six alternatives:

- Alternative 1: No Action
- **Preferred Alternative 2:** Atlas AOA Option W-1
- **Preferred Alternative 3:** Atlas AOA Option W-4
- **Preferred Alternative 4:** Atlas AOA Option W-8
- Alternative 5: Atlas AOA Option C-3
- Alternative 6: Atlas AOA Option C-13

The AOA Alternatives considered in the FPEIS were developed based on an evaluation of available spatial data in federal waters of the Gulf, feedback received through public comment opportunities, and the best available science and literature on aquaculture and the region. The locations were informed by a spatial planning process led by NOAA's National Centers for Coastal and Ocean Science to identify areas with a high potential to support three to five commercial-scale marine aquaculture operations in the Gulf, and resulted in the publication of *An Aquaculture Opportunity Area Atlas for the U.S. Gulf of Mexico*¹.

II. Decision and Rationale for Decision

Through the FPEIS, NMFS considered the purpose and need of the proposed action, analyzed a reasonable range of alternatives, and considered public and interagency comments received during the PEIS scoping and review periods. Public comment on this action included a 60-day comment period on the Notice of Intent and a 90-day comment period on the Draft PEIS, which included the opportunity for the public to provide written comments and verbal comments through public listening sessions. NMFS worked in consultation and coordination with federal agencies, regional fishery management councils (i.e., Gulf Council) and appropriate state and tribal governments, as directed by E.O. 13921.

¹ *An Aquaculture Opportunity Area Atlas for the U.S. Gulf of Mexico* was published prior to Executive Order (E.O.) 14172, "Restoring Names That Honor American Greatness" (Jan. 20, 2025), which directed that the Gulf of Mexico be renamed the Gulf of America.

The identification of AOAs supports long-term planning for marine aquaculture development in federal waters of the Gulf. The FPEIS analyzes and discusses the potential impacts of identifying one or more AOAs in federal waters of the Gulf, and discusses the general potential impacts of siting commercial aquaculture operations in those locations in the future. The FPEIS may be used to inform permitting, consultation, and review processes for future aquaculture operations, which could result in efficiencies in these processes and beneficial effects to the administrative environment. This planning effort does not support a specific regulatory or permitting action and does not authorize or permit any specific aquaculture-related activities or individual projects. It does not result in any effects to the physical, biological, socioeconomic, and cultural and historic environment. NMFS included the evaluation of the general potential impacts of future aquaculture operations proposed in an AOA in the FPEIS to support and inform future environmental review and permitting processes, consistent with the purpose and need for the proposed action and E.O. 13921.

The FPEIS evaluates a wide range of potential impacts of future aquaculture operations proposed in an AOA, including to the benthic environment, protected habitat, marine protected areas and special resources areas, water quality, air quality, aesthetic quality, fish, invertebrates, ESA-listed species, marine mammals and seabirds. The FPEIS also evaluated potential effects of acoustic and light disturbance, wild species aggregation, waste and unconsumed feed, escapement, non-native species introductions, use of forage fish in meal and feed, disease and pathogen transmission, antibiotic use, and marine debris. The potential impacts of future aquaculture operations sited in AOAs on commercial and recreational fishing, seafood markets and regional food systems, ports and working waterfronts, tourism economies, offshore energy development and other offshore activities and infrastructure, shipping and navigation, military readiness, and cultural and historical resources were also discussed.

Evaluating the alternatives in the FPEIS, NMFS considered the directives of E.O. 13921 and the purpose and need of the proposed action. The FPEIS concludes that the identification of AOAs has beneficial effects on the administrative environment. Efficiencies created in the siting, permitting, and environmental review of future offshore aquaculture operations located within an AOA are expected to reduce the future administrative burden on project proponents and agencies responsible for evaluating those sites and future operations. The preliminary environmental review of potentially suitable locations and evaluation of the general environmental effects associated with aquaculture, better positions applicants to make informed decisions with respect to siting and designing their proposed aquaculture operation and business. Agencies responsible for the permitting and environmental review of future proposed aquaculture operations will be able to utilize the information and analyses in this FPEIS, potentially tiering from it or incorporating it by reference, if appropriate.

NMFS has selected three preferred alternatives, **Preferred Alternative 2** (W-1), **Preferred Alternative 3** (W-4) and **Preferred Alternative 4** (W-8), concluding that they best meet the purpose and need of the proposed action and the directives of E.O. 13921. While there is some degree of administrative benefit realized for all AOA Alternatives analyzed in this FPEIS, the selection of **Preferred Alternatives 2-4** (W-1, W-4, W-8) offers the greatest administrative benefits and efficiencies of the alternatives considered by reducing potential conflicts with other ocean user groups. By evaluating the potential effects of identifying one or more AOAs in federal waters of the Gulf and the general potential impacts associated with siting aquaculture in those locations in the future, NMFS has identified three AOAs in federal waters of the Gulf of America, considered potentially suitable for finfish, shellfish, macroalgae, or multi-species aquaculture.

The AOAs identified through this action do not represent the only potential suitable sites for aquaculture in federal waters of the Gulf. The identification of AOAs does not result in any authorization, permit, or regulatory impact that privatizes a public resource, conveys property rights or establishes exclusionary zones at these locations that prevent other uses of these spaces. The FPEIS provides a foundation of information to inform the permitting and environmental review of future aquaculture operations sited in an AOA. Applicants of offshore aquaculture operations sited in an AOA may need to provide additional environmental information, including baseline (benthic) environmental surveys, environmental modeling, and monitoring of oceanographic conditions to inform their permitting and environmental review processes. Any future aquaculture operation proposed in an AOA would be required to comply with all federal and state laws and regulations applicable to that proposed operation, and the potential effects of those aquaculture operations would be assessed by the relevant agencies during required permitting and environmental review processes.

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September 11, 2025
Date

cc:

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