



SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

4055 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201
North Charleston, SC 29405
TEL 843/571-4366 FAX 843/769-4520
Toll Free: 1-866-SAFMC-10
email: safmc@safmc.net Web site: www.safmc.net

David Cupka, Chairman
Ben Hartig, Vice Chairman

Robert K. Mahood, Executive Director
Gregg Waugh, Deputy Executive Director

May 24, 2012

Michelle Morin
Chief, Environmental Branch for Renewable Energy
Bureau of Ocean Energy Management
381 Elden Street, MS 4090
Herndon, Virginia 20170-4817

Dear Ms. Morin:

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) offers the following comments in response to Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management's (BOEM) request for comments on the Environmental Assessment (EA): *Lease Issuance for Marine Hydrokinetic Technology Testing on the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Offshore Florida*.

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act directs Regional Fishery Management Councils to describe and identify Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) for each federally managed species, to minimize the extent of adverse effects on habitat caused by fishing and non-fishing activities, and to identify actions to encourage conservation and enhancement of those habitats. The Comprehensive EFH Amendment (SAFMC 1998b) and the Fishery Management Plan for the Dolphin Wahoo Fishery of the Atlantic (SAFMC 2003a) provide the Council's current EFH and EFH-Habitat Area of Particular Concern designations.

Deepwater Coral Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (Coral HAPCs) were designated under Comprehensive Ecosystem-Based Amendment 1 (SAFMC 2009b), conserving over 23,000 nautical square miles of complex deepwater coral habitat off the coasts of North and South Carolina, Georgia and eastern Florida. In § 3.1.2.7.1, the EA incorrectly identifies Comprehensive Ecosystem-Based Amendment 2 as the vehicle through which the deepwater Coral HAPCs were designated. Under Comprehensive Ecosystem-Based Amendment 2 (SAFMC 2010), the Council amended the Coral FMP to designate the deepwater Coral Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPCs) as EFH-HAPCs. Furthermore, Comprehensive Ecosystem-Based Amendment 2 (SAFMC 2010) amended the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan (FMP) and designated EFH-HAPC for golden and blueline tilefish. Golden tilefish are associated with irregular bottom comprised of troughs and terraces intermingled with sand, mud, or shell hash, especially mud-clay bottoms in depths of 150 to 300 meters. Blueline tilefish are

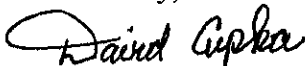
associated with hardbottom habitats characterized as rock overhangs, rock outcrops, manganese-phosphorite rock slab formations, or rocky reefs. The Council has also designated offshore, unconsolidated bottom at depths identified for lease blocks 7003, 7053, and 7054 as EFH for golden crab and royal red shrimp.

The areas under consideration for the proposed activities are within the Stetson-Miami Terrace Coral HAPC as defined in Comprehensive Ecosystem-Based Amendment 1 (SAFMC 2009b). Additionally, it is recognized that 'bottom tending gear' including anchors have been documented to cause severe and irreparable impacts to these fragile, slow growing, long-lived coral resources. Information provided in the FMP for Corals, Coral Reefs, and Live Bottom Habitats of the South Atlantic Region (SAFMC 1982) and its' associated amendments, the information in the Final Habitat Plan for the Southeast Atlantic Region (SAFMC 1998a), the Comprehensive Ecosystem Based Amendments (SAFMC 2009b, SAFMC 2010), and in the Final Report to the Department of Energy (Vinick et al, 2012), indicates that significant benthic resources reside within the majority of lease blocks 7003, 7053 and 7054. Lack of sediment limits the suitability of these plots for the proposed mode of 'Mooring/Telemetry Buoy' MTB anchoring. Repeated deployments in these areas will likely increase the probability of impact to existing slow growing, long-lived coral resources. Additional geophysical and acoustical investigations are recommended to identify areas that are devoid of coral and hardbottom habitats, and have physical conditions compatible with the proposed anchoring systems. These investigations could effectively minimize the potential for impacts from the proposed repeated anchor deployments.

The Council (and its' Coral Advisory Panel), after review of the information provided in the associated EA, recommends that activities such as those described for the "Marine Hydrokinetic Technology Testing on the Outer Continental Shelf Offshore Florida" project concentrate in regions of low relief and significant sediments. Considering all available information to-date, this would indicate that suitable areas would most likely be found in the western and north western regions of lease block 7053. The Council also supports the EFH Conservation Recommendations the National Marine Fisheries Service has developed in response to BOEM's request for comments on this EA.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments. Please direct questions or comments to Anna Martin (Anna.Martin@safmc.net) at the SAFMC office, (843) 571-4366.

Sincerely,



David Cupka
SAFMC Chair

cc: (via electronic mail)
BOEM, michelle.morin@boemre.gov, brian.hooker@boemre.gov
Council members and staff
Coral AP members
David Dale
Jocelyn Karazsia

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