

Dated: October 30, 1998.

**Donald J. Barry,**

*Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks.*

[FR Doc. 98-29954 Filed 11-5-98; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 4310-55-P

## DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

### National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

#### 50 CFR Part 622

[I.D. 103098C]

RIN 0648-AJ17

#### Fisheries of the Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico, and South Atlantic; Amendment to the Fishery Management Plans of the Gulf of Mexico

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

**ACTION:** Notice of availability of an amendment to fishery management plans; request for comments.

**SUMMARY:** NMFS announces that the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) has submitted for review and approval a generic amendment to the fishery management plans of the Gulf of Mexico that designates essential fish habitat (EFH). Written comments are requested from the public.

**DATES:** Written comments must be received on or before January 8, 1999.

**ADDRESSES:** Comments must be mailed to the Southeast Regional Office, NMFS, 9721 Executive Center Drive N., St. Petersburg, FL 33702.

Requests for copies of the generic amendment, which includes an environmental assessment, should be sent to the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, 3018 U.S. Highway 301 North, Suite 1000, Tampa, FL 33619-2266; Phone: 727-228-2815; Fax: 727-225-7015.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Robert Sadler, 813-570-5305.

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act, 16 U.S.C. 1801 et seq.) requires each regional fishery management council to submit any

fishery management plan (FMP) or amendment to the Secretary of Commerce for review and approval, disapproval, or partial approval. The Magnuson-Stevens Act also requires that NMFS, upon receiving an amendment, immediately publish a document in the **Federal Register** stating that the amendment is available for public review and comment.

Therefore, NMFS solicits comments on the approval, disapproval, or partial approval of this generic amendment designating EFH in the Gulf of Mexico.

Section 303(a)(7) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act requires that any FMP describe and identify EFH for the fishery, minimize to the extent practicable adverse effects on such habitat caused by fishing, and identify other actions to encourage the conservation and enhancement of such habitat. Section 305(b)(1)(A) and (B) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act require that the regional fishery management councils submit, by October 11, 1998, FMP amendments to identify and describe EFH for species under management.

NMFS published guidelines to assist regional fishery management councils in the description and identification of EFH, the identification of adverse impacts on EFH, and the identification of actions required to conserve and enhance EFH (62 FR 66531, December 19, 1997). The NMFS guidelines encourage ecosystem approaches to protecting and conserving EFH. Ecological roles of the managed species (i.e., prey, competitors, trophic links within foodwebs, and nutrient transfer between ecosystems) should be considered when identifying EFH. The guidelines also specify that sufficient EFH be protected and conserved to support sustainable fisheries and managed species' contribution to a healthy ecosystem.

The generic amendment designates EFH for species included in all seven of the Council's FMPs. EFH is identified and described based on areas where various life stages of 26 selected managed species and the coral complex commonly occur. The Council selected these 26 species because they are considered to be ecologically representative of the remaining species in the FMPs. The selected species are: Shrimp (brown shrimp, white shrimp, pink shrimp, royal red shrimp); red drum; reef fish (red grouper, gag grouper, scamp grouper, black grouper,

red snapper, vermilion snapper, gray snapper, yellowtail snapper, lane snapper, greater amberjack, lesser amberjack, tilefish, and gray triggerfish); coastal migratory pelagic species (king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, cobia, dolphin, bluefish, little tunny); stone crab; spiny lobster; and the coral complex.

The selected species represent about a third of the species under management by the Council. EFH for the remaining managed species will be addressed in future FMP amendments, as appropriate.

EFH is identified based on where the individual managed species commonly occur. Collectively, these species commonly occur throughout all of the marine and estuarine waters of the Gulf of Mexico. For purposes of this generic EFH amendment, EFH is separated into estuarine and marine components. Collectively, EFH for the estuarine component 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). Collectively, EFH in marine waters of the Gulf of Mexico includes all marine waters and substrates (mud, sand, shell, rock, and associated biological communities) from the shoreline to the seaward limit of the exclusive economic zone.

The amendment also identifies: Threats to EFH from fishing and nonfishing activities; options to conserve and enhance EFH; and research needs. 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 adequate information to decide whether measures are practicable.

Comments received by January 8, 1999 will be considered in the approval/disapproval decision on the amendment.

**Authority:** 16 U.S.C. 1801 et seq.

Dated: November 3, 1998.

**Bruce C. Morehead,**

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

[FR Doc. 98-29944 Filed 11-6-98; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3510-22-F