

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Commercial Leasing for Critical Minerals Offshore American Samoa

Environmental Assessment

U.S. Department of Interior
Minerals Management Administration (MMA), Pacific OCS Region

October 2026

Introduction

The Minerals Management Administration (formerly the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, BOEM) prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) to evaluate the potential environmental impacts of issuing up to two commercial leases for marine minerals on the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) offshore American Samoa. The EA (BOEM 2026-007, July 2026) was prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Department of the Interior's (DOI) NEPA implementation regulations (43 CFR Part 46), and the DOI NEPA Handbook (516 Department Manual 1). The proposed lease areas offshore American Samoa are on the federal OCS. Section 3 of the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act (OCSLA) (43 United States Code [U.S.C.] §1332) declares that the OCS is a vital national resource reserve held by the Federal Government and falls under MMA's statutory authority.

MMA prepared the EA to determine whether the Proposed Action of lease issuance may result in significant effects, triggering additional mitigation to reduce such effects, or the need to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The EA was also prepared to assist with MMA planning and decision-making, namely, to help inform a determination as to whether the Proposed Action would cause undue or serious harm or damage to the human, marine, or coastal environment. MMA may decide to issue leases within all, a portion, or none of the areas analyzed in the EA.

MMA determined, with the EA and supporting documents, that the Proposed Action will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment as described in Section 102(2)(c) of NEPA. Therefore, the preparation of an EIS is not required and MMA issues this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI).

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to issue up to two commercial leases for marine minerals in the American Samoa OCS. The need is to provide access to marine minerals that could support U.S. manufacturing, national security, and economic resilience and the sustainable development of strategic mineral resources while ensuring environmental protection and compliance with applicable laws. This supports the directives in President Trump's April 2025 Executive Order 14285, "Unleashing America's Offshore Critical Minerals and Resources," which call for the development of domestic capabilities for the exploration, characterization,

collection, and processing of seabed mineral resources through streamlined permitting without compromising environmental and transparency standards.

Evaluation of Alternatives

The EA evaluates the Proposed Action and reasonable alternatives, including the No Action Alternative, consistent with NEPA Section 102(2)(C). The EA considers the environmental effects associated with preliminary activities that may occur after lease issuance.

Proposed Action (Alternative A)

MMA proposes to issue up to two leases authorizing only preliminary activities, such as high-resolution geophysical surveys, limited seabed and biological sampling, and oceanographic measurements. No mining operations would be authorized under these leases; any future mining would require separate environmental review and approval. The Proposed Action Area is located at least 50 miles from the nearest land, including Rose Atoll and the main islands of American Samoa.

Maximum Leasing (Alternative B)

Under this alternative, five leases would be issued in the same area as Alternative A, making each lease smaller (26,800 km²) in size, akin to the size of subdivided exploration contracts managed by the International Seabed Authority. Impacts would be similar to but potentially greater than those of Alternative A due to the potential addition of more preliminary activities associated with the higher number of issued leases.

No Action (Alternative C)

Under this alternative, MMA would not issue commercial leases offshore American Samoa. The Proposed Action would not occur. Although this alternative may maintain current conditions, it does not meet the purpose and need for this EA.

Anticipated Impacts of the Proposed Action's Preliminary Activities

Oceanography and Water Quality: Routine vessel operations, discharges, sampling activities, and equipment deployment associated with the Proposed Action may cause short-term, localized disturbances to oceanography and water quality, but any sediment or accidental small-volume hydrocarbon releases are expected to dissipate quickly, with conditions returning to ambient levels within minutes.

Geology: MMA calculated that only 2,667 m² of seabed, or roughly 0.0000019% of the total project area (Appendix A of the EA), would potentially be removed for sampling during preliminary activities. Therefore, geophysical surveys are not expected to impact geological resources due to the relatively small footprint.

Offshore Habitats: Offshore habitats, including epipelagic, mesopelagic, bathypelagic, abyssalpelagic, and the abyssal plain would not experience significant or lasting effects due to the limited spatial extent of activities, though the persistence and sensitivity of deep-sea communities does warrant careful consideration. Potential stressors from proposed activities include habitat disturbance, sediment plumes and turbidity, marine debris, anthropogenic noise,

artificial light, and electromagnetic field (EMF) alteration. MMA's analysis concludes that, considering the limited scope of preliminary activities, (much like what is done during research cruises), the Proposed Action is not expected to result in substantial adverse impacts to offshore habitats. Lease stipulations will further reduce any risk of adverse impacts to offshore habitats.

Marine Mammals and Sea Turtles: Marine mammals and sea turtles may be exposed to underwater sound and vessel activity; however, considering the limited scope of preliminary activities, (much like what is done during research cruises), negligible impacts are expected. Lease stipulations (including vessel strike avoidance, Protected Species Observers, passive acoustic monitoring, and equipment deployment protocols) will further reduce the risk of adverse impacts to marine mammals and sea turtles.

Commercial and Non-Commercial Fisheries: The Proposed Action is unlikely to cause substantial, long-term impacts to commercial and non-commercial fisheries because interactions with survey vessels are expected to be spatially limited and short-term; the American Samoa longline fishery could be temporarily displaced by survey activities. Negative impacts will be further limited by two fishery-related lease stipulations (Appendix C) which support robust implementation of a Fisheries Communication Plan, early engagement, and adaptive management.

Marine Cultural Resources: Marine cultural resources are unlikely to be present in the deep-water action area. Further, considering the limited scope of preliminary activities, (much like what is done during research cruises), and the deep-water action area, significant impacts to marine cultural resources are not expected to occur.

However, MMA anticipates that existing federal historic preservation and environmental laws and regulations would reduce the magnitude of overall impacts on any cultural resources that may be present. In addition, protective lease stipulations would minimize potential risk to marine cultural resources. Lease stipulations for marine cultural resources include requiring the lessee to ensure a Qualified Marine Archaeologist is involved in specific surveys and inspections of samples, to conduct visual examination with video recording of box core and free-fall grab samples collected during preliminary activities, to implement a specific HRG survey methodology and reporting of survey results, and to conduct unanticipated discovery protocols in the event of a discovery or unanticipated effect.

Other Resources Analyzed: The EA also analyzes the effects of preliminary activities on air quality; nearshore habitats, protected habitats, marine and coastal birds; Threatened and Endangered Species, societal factors, navigation, and vessel traffic. Preliminary activities include conducting additional surveys to characterize the seabed and surrounding environment; these types of data collection efforts are routinely carried out by domestic and international agencies. Geological, oceanographic, and biological surveys that gather information on seabed conditions, physical parameters, and species presence are essential for describing this deep-sea setting. For the Proposed Action, the total estimated at sea time for operations is found in EA Table 2-6. Within its environmental analysis, MMA considered the distance of preliminary activities from local communities in American Samoa. Overall, the effects of preliminary activities on these resources are expected to be negligible.

Effects of the Action

As directed by the DOI NEPA Handbook Appendix 1, item 6. *Significance, including Reaching a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)*, I have considered the following in my evaluation of the degree of the effects from the issuance of up to two leases authorizing only preliminary activities:

Short and Long-term Effects: The EA considered the Proposed Action's potential contribution to impacts when combined with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable activities for the American Samoa Area of Interest. The EA effects analyses indicate that (1) the Proposed Action is not expected to constitute an irretrievable and irreversible commitment of resources, since the leases considered do not authorize any mining operations on the OCS; and (2) activities expected to take place after lease issuance (e.g., preliminary activities) are not anticipated to produce significant impacts and are not anticipated to combine with the effects of other activities such that the incremental effects of the action result in significant impacts.

Beneficial and Adverse Effects: Potential adverse effects of preliminary activities to air quality; nearshore habitats, protected habitats, marine and coastal birds; Threatened and Endangered Species, societal factors, navigation, and vessel traffic are expected to occur at negligible levels. Significant adverse effects are not anticipated for any resource. Therefore, the level of adverse and beneficial effects of preliminary activities does not render the potential impacts significant.

Effects of Public Health and Safety: Within its environmental analysis, MMA considered the distance of preliminary activities from local communities, potential effects of anticipated discharges and emissions, and the potential for preliminary activities to interfere with subsistence activities. Due to the nature and location of preliminary activities, they are expected to have little to no effect on public health or safety. Therefore, the degree to which the preliminary activities may affect public health or safety does not render the potential impacts significant.

Economic Effects: Potential beneficial effects of a lease sale to commercial fishing may include port upgrades in Pago Pago, which could also improve fishing infrastructure. Adverse effects would be the temporary displacement of the American Samoa longline fishery within the proposed action area, which is at least 50 miles from the nearest land, including Rose Atoll and the main islands of American Samoa. Given the distance from shore and that the American Samoa Area of Interest is in abyssal waters between 4,000-and 6,000 m deep, direct economic interactions with the economy are limited. The use of port facilities would have a minimal effect and completely recover after preliminary activities are complete. Therefore, a lease sale and preliminary activities on economics does not render the potential impacts significant.

Effects on the quality of life of the people of American Samoa: Impacts to quality of life may include short-term increased activity near the Port of Pago Pago and temporary changes to access and use of communal or traditional fishing areas. The lease sale and preliminary activities are not expected to substantially impact the quality of life of the people in American Samoa.

Public Availability

The EA and FONSI will be posted to the American Samoa Offshore Minerals Lease Sale [project](#)

[website](#) and archived to the MMA [Pacific Region NEPA website](#).

Finding of No Significant Impact

Based on MMA's evaluation of the Proposed Action, the Environmental Assessment, and all supporting documentation, MMA concludes that the preliminary activities anticipated to occur following lease issuance would not result in significant environmental impacts or constitute a major Federal action. Accordingly, MMA has determined that the Proposed Action will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment within the meaning of Section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and therefore warrants a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI).

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