



United States Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Fairbanks Fish and Wildlife Field Office
101 12th Avenue, Room 110
Fairbanks, Alaska 99701

May 11, 2015



Memorandum

To: Frances Mann, Acting Supervisor, Office of Environment, Alaska Region of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management

From: Ted Swem, Endangered Species Branch Chief *Ted Swem*

Subject: Request for concurrence on ESA section 7 determination of *not likely to adversely affect northern sea otters* and their critical habitat for vessel movements related to Shell Gulf of Mexico, Inc.'s 2015 exploration program

This memorandum is in response to your concurrence request for effects of the proposed Action on endangered and threatened species pursuant to Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (ESA).

THE PROPOSED ACTION

We understand that Shell Gulf of Mexico, Inc. (Shell), a lessee operating under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), anticipates that three off-shore supply vessels (OSV's) would make up to 30 round trips (combined for all OSV's) from Dutch Harbor to resupply the mobile offshore drilling units (MODUs) and support vessels in the Chukchi Sea each drilling season. Drilling materials, food, fuel and other supplies would be picked up in Dutch Harbor (with possible minor resupply coming out of Kotzebue) and transported to the MODUs and support vessels. These three OSV's are 300 ft. (91.5 m) long and 64ft. (19.5 m) wide with a draft of 19.6 ft. (5.9 m). Each vessel can travel at speeds of up to 13 knots. They can each accommodate 50 personnel and have 5,786 bbl. (920m³) of available fuel storage.

THE ACTION AREA

The Action Area includes areas where activities could have direct and indirect effects on listed species and designated critical habitat.

EFFECTS OF THE ACTION ON LISTED SPECIES

Project effects on northern sea otters

The Service listed the southwest Alaska distinct population segment (DPS) of the northern sea otter as threatened on August 9, 2005 (70 FR 46366). The OSVs may encounter listed sea otters when transiting in and out of Dutch in the vicinity of Unalaska Bay as they transit through the Bering Sea on their way to and from the Chukchi Sea.

Sea otter densities are considered relatively low around Dutch Harbor on Amaknak Island (Figure 1). A U.S. Army Corps of Engineers conducted 21 sea otter surveys around Dutch Harbor between 2006 and 2013 and the highest mean number of otters in one survey was 2.5 individuals/km (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, unpubl. data). While 7% of recovered carcasses from across the state of Alaska were reportedly struck by boats (Gill et al, in prep as cited by BOEM), the numbers being struck around Dutch Harbor may be fewer because sea otters around Dutch Harbor may be habituated to extensive vessel traffic due to the great frequency with which all sizes and classes of boats transit the area all year round. Vessels over 300 gross tons transiting the action area will increase by approximately 6% as a result of the three Shell vessels making 30 trips in 2015 (US Coast Guard, Chief Warrant Officer Dustin Overturf, pers. comm, 5/8/2015). Given the small increase in vessel transit activity, and the low density of sea otters currently occupying the action area, the Service concurs with BOEM's determination that the Shell vessels transiting Unalaska Bay in 2015 are not likely to adversely affect the Southwest Alaska DPS of northern sea otter. The Service recommends however, that BOEM encourage Shell vessels to restrict their operating speed once they near Unalaska to further reduce the very small risk they may strike a sea otter.

Impacts to sea otters could also hypothetically result from fuel spills occurring during refueling of vessels in port in Dutch Harbor. However, spills, should they occur, are expected to be quickly contained and cleaned up, with the result that either spilled fuel or response activities are not expected to result in injury or death of one or more sea otters.

We concur with BOEM's determination that transit of Shell's ORVs in and out of Dutch Harbor in 2015 is not likely to adversely affect northern sea otters.

Project effects on designated northern sea otter critical habitat

The Service designated critical habitat for the southwest Alaska DPS of the northern sea otter on October 8, 2009 (74 FR 51988). Critical habitat occurs in nearshore marine waters around Unalaska Island (Unit 2) ranging from the mean high tide line seaward for a distance of 100 meters, or to a water depth of 20 meters. Some ORVs may enter designated critical habitat in the vicinity of the Dutch Harbor port and Unalaska Bay on Unalaska Island.

We concur with BOEM's determination that vessel traffic associated with the proposed action will not impact or cause loss of designated northern sea otter critical habitat because intersect will likely be limited to the port of Dutch Harbor, where habitat is already degraded due to the presence of infrastructure.

Summary

Because the proposed transit of Shell's vessels would have, at most, a discountable impact on the southwest Alaska DPS of the northern sea otter, the Service concurs that the proposed action is not likely to adversely affect this species. Likewise, because intersect between the proposed

action and designated critical habitat is limited to the port of Dutch Harbor, where the habitat's value is already reduced by the presence of infrastructure, the Service concurs that the proposed project would have no effect on designated critical habitat. Further consultation under section 7 of the ESA is not necessary at this time. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this project. If you need further assistance, please contact Ted Swem (907) 456-0441.

