

## U. S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

### ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION STATEMENT FOR CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION

Within the spirit and intent of the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and other statutes, orders, and policies that protect fish and wildlife resources, I concur that the following proposed action qualifies as a categorical exclusion from NEPA documentation requirements consistent with 40 CFR 1508.4, 516 DM 2.3A, 516 DM 2 Appendix 1, and 516 DM 6 Appendix 1.4.

#### **A. Project Information**

**Project Name:** Alabama Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Monitoring Program (Implementation)

**Project Title:** Measuring and monitoring of SAV, mapping SAV, and the collection and subsequent sowing of SAV seeds.

**Project Tracking #:** RESTORE Council (AL\_RESTORE\_005\_003\_Cat2)

**Project Sponsor:** State of Alabama

**Project Location:** Mobile and Baldwin Counties, Alabama

#### **B. Proposed Action and Alternatives** *(Describe the proposed action and any alternatives explored. Discuss briefly why proposed action was selected over other alternatives.)*

The **Alabama Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Restoration and Monitoring Project** seeks to utilize RESTORE Act funds to further the State's comprehensive efforts to sustain and restore SAV in coastal Alabama. These efforts advance the goals and objectives of the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan of the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program and supports ongoing efforts of the NOAA funded Alabama Coastal Zone Management Program.

The proposed timeframe of 5 years builds upon over 30 years of effort to measure and monitor SAV in coastal Alabama. Specific project components include:

##### ***Lower Perdido Bay Sea Grass Protection and Restoration:***

Lower Perdido Bay contains some of Alabama's most extensive seagrass beds, but it is also one of the most popular areas for recreational boating along the coast. In the last decade, the State has implemented no wake zones around the grassbeds and a 2006 Gulf of Mexico Program Community Based Restoration Grant (GOMF-CRP 2006) supported prop scar restoration efforts and education outreach in the area. RESTORE funds will be used to add additional bird stakes to the area, which are a proven method for prop scar restoration. Additional navigational signage advising the public of the boundaries of no-motor zones and the presence of sea grasses will also be placed.

Educational signage describing the importance of SAVs will also be placed at strategic locations around the adjacent waterways and educational brochures will be printed and distributed.

***Upper Mobile Bay and the lower Mobile/Tensaw River Delta SAV Restoration Project:***  
SAV seeds (particularly *Vallisneria sp.*) will be collected in order to be sown in areas known to historically have *Vallisneria* present (based on 1994 and 2002 mapping) but which have not recovered since tropical storm events and drought of 2004-2007. Seeds may also be utilized to grow SAV plugs for planting in such areas.

***Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Monitoring Program:***

It has been five years since the last comprehensive mapping of SAV in coastal Alabama. In 2014, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation announced that Gulf Environmental Benefit Funds will be awarded to update SAV maps in Alabama. Alabama seeks to leverage this effort to collect 2 additional SAV measurements over the next 5-7 years, each 2-3 years apart. In each case, aerial imagery will be analyzed to determine SAV coverage and create a GIS shapefile of SAV coverage, with species composition noted for each polygon. Imagery acquisition, imagery analysis and field work to ground-truth SAV species and coverage will be conducted in accordance with NOAA protocols in order to maintain data consistency between collections. A report on SAV coverage, species composition and status & trends will be developed from each monitoring event.

- C. **Categorical Exclusion(s)** (*Quote and provide the Departmental Manual citation(s) for the specific Categorical Exclusions you are using; if it appears necessary, discuss why you believe the action fits as this Categorical Exclusion; mention that the action does not trigger an Exception to the Categorical Exclusions at 43 C.F.R. 46.210(e) or 516 DM 2 Appendix 2; and/or if it does trigger an Exception, discuss why it does not apply for this action.*)

***43 C.F.R. 46.210(e)***

“Nondestructive data collection, inventory (including field, aerial, and satellite surveying and mapping), study, research and monitoring activities.”

This action does not trigger an Exception to the Categorical Exclusions at 43 C.F.R. 46.210(e).

***516 DM 8.5(B)(6)***

“The reintroduction or supplementation (e.g., stocking) of native, formerly native, or established species into suitable habitat within their historic or established range, where no or negligible environmental disturbance are anticipated.”

This action does not trigger an Exception to the Categorical Exclusions at 516 DM 2 Appendix 2.

- D. **Permits/Approvals** (*Discuss any additional permits/approvals needed before the proposed action can be implemented, such as a Clean Water Act section 404 permit, Endangered Species Act section 7 consultation, and/or National Historic Preservation Act section 106 clearance.*)

This project will be implemented by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources in partnership with the Dauphin Island Sea Lab (DISL), Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, The City of Orange Beach and The Nature Conservancy (TNC). Both the DISL and TNC currently hold USACE Nationwide Permits for annual maintenance and replacement of zone signage, educational signage, as well as the installation of new bird stakes in prop scars as

they are identified in this area. The gathering of SAV seeds in a non-destructive manner is not subject to regulatory requirements. No USACE permit is required for seed gathering or sowing. Seeding plots will be marked in a non-permanent manner using biodegradable natural materials, which will not require USACE permits. Additionally, this restoration project is considered a Permissible Use under Alabama Coastal Area Management Program. There are no expected issues with Service Trust resources from project implementation. This proposal would require no additional permitting.

- E. **Public Involvement/Interagency Coordination** (*Discuss the opportunities provided to the public, other agencies, and/or Tribes to get involved with the proposed action, any significant comments they may have made, and our responses.*)

The RESTORE Council intends to publish a draft Funded Priorities List of projects in the Federal Register soliciting public comments in August 2015. The activity-specific appendices will inform the readers of instances in which the Council proposes to use a Categorical Exclusion(s) or adopt an Environmental Assessment. The appropriate weblinks to those documents would be available on the Council's website.

- F. **Supporting Documents** (Supporting documents for this determination include relevant office file material and the following key references: *List document citations here.*)

- (1) *The RESTORE Council website:*

<http://www.restorethegulf.gov/release/2015/03/12/council-selected-restoration-component-proposals-and-context-reports>

- (2) *Specific Project Proposal:*

**Alabama Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Restoration and Monitoring Project (PDF)**

- (3) *Letter dated July 7, 2015, from the Service's Ecological Services Office located in Daphne, Alabama, documenting the environmental compliance review.*



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(Signature Authority)

7-9-15

(date)