

3/15/06-02485



DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY
NAVAL FACILITIES ENGINEERING COMMAND
ATLANTIC
6506 HAMPTON BLVD
NORFOLK VA 23508-1278

TELEPHONE NO:

IN REPLY REFER TO

Mr. Miles M. Croom
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Office
Southeast Regional Office
263 13th Avenue South
St. Petersburg, Florida 33701

RE: Mangrove Essential Fish Habitat Assessment for former Vieques Naval Training Range
Solid Waste Management Unit 6 in Vieques, Puerto Rico

Dear Mr. Croom

The Navy is submitting the enclosed document in compliance with the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) Applicable or Relevant and Appropriate Requirements (ARARs) substantive to the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. Under the habitat classification by the Caribbean Fishery Management Council and under the requirements of the Act, the Navy is submitting an Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) assessment for CERCLA site debris removal on the former Naval Ammunition Support Detachment (NASD) located on Vieques Island, Puerto Rico. The Navy has previously advised in a letter dated January 9, 2006 on its intention to comply with the EFH assessment requirements mandated by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) in its letter to the Navy dated November 3, 2005. The Navy's response letter advised of its intention to fulfill EFH requirements for mangrove habitats associated with the terrestrial cleanup at the former NASD. Marine environmental EFH and other ARARs under the jurisdiction of NMFS will be executed when funding is approved.

The NAVY welcomes your evaluation of the enclosed EFH assessment. Please note that the enclosed EFH assessment has already been reviewed by Lisamarie Carrubba. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Mr. Jeffrey Harlow, West Vieques Remedial Project Manager, Naval Facilities Engineering Command, Atlantic at 757-322-4787 and jeffrey.harlow@navy.mil.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey Harlow
West Vieques Remedial Project Manager
Naval Facilities Engineering Command Atlantic
Environmental Division
By direction of the Commander

Enclosure

Cc:

NAVFAC Atlantic (Messrs. Byron Brant, Christopher Penny, Johnny Noles, Ms. Bonnie Capito)

CH2M HILL (Messrs. John Tomik, Stacin Martin, Brett Doerr, Ms. Susana Struve)

INTRODUCTION/PROPOSED ACTION

This EFH assessment is being conducted to support Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) requirements at former Naval Ammunition Support Detachment (NASD) Solid Waste Management Unit (SWMU) 6 that the Navy formerly used for military training logistical support. The project includes excavation and removal (offsite) of an estimated 450 tons of debris and associated soil from a tidal mangrove wetland area encompassing approximately 1.25 acres. The debris is an accumulation of waste discarded at the site, including rusty metal, car parts, rubber tires, broken glass, rubble, and empty containers. This project will take place during the first two calendar quarters of 2006.

Figure 1 (attached) shows the geographic location of SWMU 6 on the island of Vieques. The SWMU is located on Department of Interior (DOI) property, within the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge, which is managed by United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Figure 2 (attached) shows SWMU 6 and the geographic features in its vicinity pertinent to the Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Assessment. None of the proposed excavation area is permanently inundated with water. As noted above, the entire excavation area is a tidal mangrove wetland; however, there is a water-filled canal that borders the western 210-foot boundary of the excavation area, as shown in Figure 2. The canal separates the tidally influenced lagoons known as Kiani Lagoon North and Kiani Lagoon South.

Prior to excavation, a temporary silt fence will be installed around the perimeter of the proposed excavation area, including along the top of the bank of the aforementioned canal. Following installation of the silt fence, the site will be visually inspected and any mangrove tree not obviously growing in debris will be marked for possible retention. However, if during excavation it becomes apparent that any marked mangrove tree is growing in debris, it will be removed with the debris.

To minimize impact to the tidal mangrove area and adjacent water bodies, all excavation and restoration activities will be conducted at low tide manually or by using small excavation equipment. In addition, there is no planned dredging or filling of the canal or discharge of material from the excavation to the canal. Once the excavation and debris removal is completed, confirmatory soil samples will be collected to ensure residual constituent concentrations do not pose an unacceptable risk to ecological receptors. Following approval of confirmatory sample analysis, the excavated area will be replanted with mangroves appropriate for the various environs (i.e., consistently inundated, tidally inundated, relatively dry), in consultation with USFWS personnel located on Vieques. If NMFS desires to be included in the consultation, NMFS personnel should notify the refuge manager, USFWS, and the West Vieques Remedial Project Manager, Mr. Jeffrey Harlow. Combinations of mangrove species are already present in the area and replacement specimens will be acquired locally, again in consultation with the USFWS. For areas often flooded along the canal, red mangrove will be planted because this species is most suitable and more likely to survive. Black mangrove will be planted in areas that flood intermittently (i.e., during tidal fluctuations). Either white and/or button mangroves will be planted in drier areas along the road. Spacing will be variable but will follow the natural spacing of the existing mangroves and will be verified with the USFWS. The plantings will be performed by Navy contractors and USFWS personnel. The NMFS is invited to participate in this joint planting event.

ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT

EFH DESIGNATIONS: The single EFH at SWMU 6 is the mangrove area. As noted above, the entire site is a relatively flat mangrove area, approximately 1 acre in size, and is intermittently flooded during tidal cycles associated with a canal along the west side of the site that connects Kiani Lagoon North and Kiani Lagoon South. Red mangrove and black mangrove communities occur, with the red mangroves located near the open water where there is frequent saturation/inundation of seawater, while the black mangroves are located more inland at a slightly higher elevation.

The mangrove habitat has been identified as EFH for several species that are likely to occur at or near SWMU 6. The following designations are based on the recently finalized rule (50 CFR Parts 600 and 622, Nov. 28, 2005) issued by the National Marine Fisheries Service to implement a comprehensive amendment to the four Fishery Management Plans (FMPs) of the U.S. Caribbean. The Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Generic Essential Fish Habitat Amendment to the FMPs (CFMC, 2004) was used as the source for the updated EFH designations listed below.

Species for which the Mangrove area is an EFH

<u>Common Name</u>	<u>Life Stage</u>
Spiny lobster	Juvenile
Gray snapper	Adult, Juvenile
Lane snapper	Adult, Juvenile
Mutton snapper	Adult, Juvenile
Dog snapper	Adult, Juvenile
Schoolmaster	Adult, Juvenile
Mahogany snapper	Juvenile
Yellowtail snapper	Adult, Juvenile
Nassau grouper	Juvenile
Goliath grouper	Juvenile
Red hind	Juvenile
Graysby	Juvenile
White grunt	Adult, Juvenile
Margate	Juvenile
Tomtate	Adult, Juvenile
Bluestriped grunt	Adult, Juvenile

French grunt	Adult, Juvenile
Porkfish	Adult, Juvenile
Yellow goatfish	Adult
Sea bream	Adult, Juvenile
Longspine squirrelfish	Adult
Horse-eye jack	Adult
Bar jack	Adult
Rainbow parrotfish	Adult
Redtail parrotfish	Adult
Stoplight parrotfish	Adult
Striped parrotfish	Adult
Blue tang	Adult
Ocean surgeonfish	Adult
Doctorfish	Adult
Spanish hogfish	Adult, Juvenile
Gray angelfish	Adult

ASSESSMENT

Although a number of fish species utilize mangroves as EFHs, the area where debris removal is to take place represents a very small fraction of the total mangrove area in this part of Vieques. Further, because none of the mangrove area where debris removal is to take place is constantly inundated with water (i.e., area is tidal), none of the mangroves provide permanent habitat for any fish species. Fish may utilize these mangroves for hunting and cover during extreme high tide, but they move on to other areas with the receding tide. Further, mangroves are much more productive (in terms of providing ongoing food sources and protection for fish) in areas where even at low tide the prop roots extend well into the water column. This condition occurs along the northwestern and western fringes of the removal area, which are not intended for disturbance as part of the debris removal action.

In addition to the above, the debris removal will provide a long-term benefit to the aquatic and semi-aquatic environment by removing potential sources of contamination. Further, the EFH disturbed as part of the removal action will be reversibly impacted, given that the mangrove area will be re-vegetated following the debris removal.

CONCLUSION

Based on the project design and the tidal characteristic of the EFH, the Navy contends that potential adverse impacts to EFH will be minimal and temporary. In fact, the long-term affects on the EFH will be beneficial, given that the potential long-term source of contamination (i.e., debris) will be removed and the EFH will be re-vegetated with appropriate mangrove specimens selected in consultation with USFWS (and NMFS if desired).

REFERENCES

Caribbean Fishery Management Council (CFMC), *Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Generic Essential Fish Habitat Amendment to: Spiny Lobster Fishery Management Plan, Queen Conch Fishery Management Plan, Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan, and Coral Reef Fishery Management Plan for the U.S. Caribbean*. March 2004.

Mangrove Forests of Vieques, Puerto Rico, Vol. I; Management Report to the US Navy produced by Mangrove Systems, Tampa, FL under contract with the US Navy. in 1989.

Mangrove Forest Health and Status report (contract number N62470-95-D-1160) for the Navy in March 2002.