NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL OCEAN SERVICE

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI) FOR ESTABLISHING A GULF OF MEXICO DISASTER RESPONSE CENTER IN MOBILE, ALABAMA JUNE 2009

1. Purpose and Need

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Ocean Service (NOS) proposed construction of a Gulf of Mexico Disaster Response Center (GoMDRC) at one of various alternative sites in Mobile, Alabama (AL). The Gulf of Mexico is particularly vulnerable to disasters that stem from frequent hurricanes and other severe weather events; the pollution potential of its oil industry and other sources, all of which could impact its fragile ecosystem; the large number of its economically critical ports, waterways, and fishing industries; complex hurricane evacuation scenarios; and numerous preparedness and response activities. The GoMDRC would serve as a location for consolidating and coordinating staff, resources, and programmatic capability to provide NOAA scientific expertise throughout the Gulf of Mexico region. NOAA's scientific support includes geo-spatial and remote sensing data; oceanic and atmospheric modeling, forecasts, and observations; incident-specific weather forecasts; emergency response during emergency events; and training before and after emergency events. Consolidation of NOAA's assets and personnel would provide greater synergy and integration across the agency and improve delivery of NOAA products and services in the Gulf region. Establishment of the GoMDRC also would result in improved mission performance and long-term operational savings. By avoiding, minimizing, and responding to the impacts of these emergencies, NOAA would be able to better protect lives, property, and natural resources.

The GoMDRC is intended to provide access to NOAA resources, as well as furnish assets and expertise to support planning for, mitigating against, responding to, and recovering from a natural or man-made disaster. Primary daily activities would include coordinating with emergency managers and coastal planners on development and application of NOAA assets; training resource managers, emergency managers, and other state and local decision makers on NOAA products; and exercising NOAA assets in conjunction with regional response agencies in preparation for a disaster event. Depending on the location selected, either a new building would be constructed or an existing building would be used. NOAA intends to pursue Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED®) certification for the building or meet the requirements of Executive Order (EO) 13423 for constructing the GoMDRC. LEED® is a set of voluntary, national standards for developing energy-efficient and environmentally friendly buildings that capitalize on

today's innovative technologies and practices. Through application of these emerging technologies and methods, buildings can be designed and constructed to be more energy efficient and to minimize impacts on the environment.

NOAA has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) dated June 2009 that complies with the requirements set forth under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, and accords with the regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) for implementation of NEPA (40 *Code of Federal Regulations* [CFR] 1500 through 1508) and NOAA Administrative Order 216-6, which describe NOAA's policies, requirements, and procedures for complying with NEPA and the implementing regulations.

The purpose of the EA is to support regional and national planning, preparedness, response, and recovery activities resulting from natural or human-induced emergencies.

The need is related to the new and expanded federal requirements for all-hazards response. These requirements can be met through NOAA's scientific assets and personnel, which can support a wide variety of emergency scenarios involving severe weather incidents, maritime accidents, oil spills, harmful algal blooms, fishery disasters, and other coastal emergencies. NOAA is first and foremost a science agency. But NOAA's mission also is to efficiently reduce human risk, as well as environmental and economic consequences, resulting from natural or human-induced emergencies. Indeed, new and expanded federal requirements for all-hazards response, as well as increased public expectations of the Federal Government, call for all federal agencies to support regional and national planning, preparedness, response, and recovery activities.

2. Description of Proposed Action

The Proposed Action is to establish a GoMDRC in or near Mobile, AL. Mobile also is the location of tropical weather monitoring programs affiliated with NOAA, including those of the University of South Alabama and the Dauphin Island Sea Lab. Co-location of these programs and the GoMDRC would strengthen the Gulf of Mexico's defense and awareness capabilities to better protect lives, property, and natural resources from natural disasters.

NOAA has specified a number of criteria by which to identify project location alternatives, and has documented use of those criteria in a Site Alternatives Study that scoped potential sites in Mobile. The

facility is to be used as a "home base" for day-to-day business, training, and actual disaster response activities. Therefore, it must be located near government facilities and amenities such as hotels, the airport, residential complexes, schools, and additional infrastructure that the City of Mobile and the surrounding area have to offer. The area of the site must exceed 1 acre, must be located outside of flood and storm surge zones, and must be capable of withstanding level 5 hurricane or tornado conditions. After applying these and other criteria to the identified sites, four alternative locations were selected for extensive evaluation in the EA:

- Alternative 1 (Preferred Location): This site alternative, the preferred location, is located west of 7340 Zeigler Blvd. and would be co-located with the Mobile County Emergency Management Agency (MCEMA). MCEMA would be allowed future use of the Response Operation Area within the GoMDRC to coordinate a response to an incident affecting the Mobile County area. The site would consist of 4 acres of the 15.23-acre MCEMA property, and the land would be provided without cost. Currently, the proposed site is a wooded lot and would require tree clearing prior to construction.
- Alternative 2: This site alternative, located at 7431 Airport Blvd., consists of approximately 3.2 acres of land at a cost of $2,700,000. The site has been developed, and an abandoned building currently is present. This structure would need to be modified to become capable of withstanding level 5 hurricane or tornado conditions to meet NOAA's requirements. Currently, 7,000 square feet (sf) of covered, outdoor storage is present, along with a security fence that limits access to the southern half of the site. The condition of the existing pavement would need further review if the pavement is not removed. The foundation, floor slab, and structural steel elements could be reused in an upgrade of the existing building. In addition, the site could require removal of a portion of surface parking, billboard signage, and a portion of the existing building. Loading docks would be excavated and associated canopies removed. Selected demolition of the existing building roof and walls could also be required, but the structure, slabs, and foundations would remain.
- Alternative 3: This site alternative, located at 1000 Cody Road, consists of approximately 1.4 acres of land at a cost of $140,000. This site alternative provides sufficient space to support construction of the GoMDRC. However, additional space is not available for any subsequent expansion of the GoMDRC to support future operations, if needed. A residential neighborhood is located to the east, so some of the vegetation along the east property line could be left to create a natural buffer. Most of the site is covered with medium- to small-growth trees and would need to be cleared. Several substantial live oak trees are present on site, requiring the removal of several of these trees for site development. Currently, no structure is located on the site.
- Alternative 4: This site alternative, located at 140 Schillinger Road, consists of approximately 1.4 acres of land at a cost of $760,878. This site alternative provides sufficient space to support construction of the GoMDRC. However, additional space is not available for any subsequent expansion of the GoMDRC to support future operations, if needed. Tree clearing and site adaptability would not be necessary because the site has been developed as a mobile home sales lot and currently has a layer of gravel coating that could be removed. A small structure is present that could be removed or renovated. A large billboard located on the southeastern corner of the site requires consideration.

3. Environmental Consequences

The EA included assessment of each alternative described above and found that minimal environmental impacts can be expected regardless of which alternative is selected. Documentation of agency coordination and concurrence with these findings is contained in the EA, and copies of formal correspondence also appear in the appendix to the EA.

Specific resource impacts identified in the EA include the following:

- **Location and Land Use.** The Preferred Location would have minor impacts associated with clearing a wooded area and increasing impermeable land due to construction of structures. However, this would be consistent with land development occurring in the area. Other alternative locations would have minor impacts except for Alternative 3, which impacts would result from clearing several substantial live oak trees present on site and fragmenting an existing wooded area.
- **Geology.** The Preferred Location and all alternative locations would exert no impacts on regional geology and minimal impacts on local geology from constructing a building to withstand level 5 hurricanes and tornados
- **Soils.** The Preferred Location would have temporary impacts on the soils due to compaction and increased runoff during construction activities. Alternative 3 would have similar impacts. Alternatives 2 and 4 would have minimal impacts because the sites have already been paved.
- **Groundwater.** The Preferred Location and all alternative locations would negligibly impact groundwater supply and minor impacts on groundwater quality from potential stormwater runoff, fuel tanks, and an emergency generator.
- **Surface Water.** No impacts on surface hydrology would be expected because any new development or remodeling of existing building(s) would occur at significant distance from any surface waters. Minor and temporary impacts may occur because of increases in local erosion and surface runoff during construction, increasing turbidity and sedimentation.
- **Flora and Fauna.** The Preferred Location would exert minor impacts on vegetation and terrestrial wildlife in the vicinity due to loss of vegetation and habitat, as well as minor and temporary impacts on fauna from construction noise. Alternative 3 would exert similar impacts. Alternatives 2 and 4 would undergo/exert minor and temporary impacts from construction noise because they are not currently vegetated.
- **Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Species.** Based on available data on the state- and federally-listed threatened, endangered, and sensitive (TES) species, the Preferred Location and all alternative locations would not likely impact any of the listed species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), NOAA, Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM), and Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources all concur.
- **Insects, Disease, and Other Exotic Organisms.** The Preferred Location and all alternative locations would undergo/exert minor and temporary impacts during construction activities.
- **Air Quality.** Construction of the building would temporarily impact local air quality due to possible fugitive dust dispersion and exhaust from construction vehicles. However, these impacts would be temporary (during construction period), would be addressed by using dust suppression and abatement techniques, and would not significantly impact the attainment status of criteria pollutants. Minimal impacts would also occur from operation of a diesel generator.

- **Noise.** Construction associated with the building would result in temporary, short-duration noise which could be bothersome to local residents and adjacent businesses. However, these effects would be temporary (during construction period), and potential noise impacts during this short-term period would be minimal.
- **Cultural and Historical Resources.** The Preferred Location and all alternative locations would have no impacts because no cultural or historic resources are located within a 1-mile radius of the sites.
- **Socioeconomic Resources.** The Preferred Location and all alternative locations would exert minor, positive impacts on the local economy, due to short-term construction expenditures and jobs, as well as longer-term beneficial effects from the facility in support of emergency response.
- **Transportation.** The Preferred Location and all alternative locations would exert minor and temporary impacts because of increased traffic on adjacent roads during construction activities, and minor and permanent impacts because of increased staff members commuting to the office and during emergency events.
- **Utilities.** The proposed use of existing utilities would be within current capacities and would not require expanding the capacities of utilities. The Preferred Location and all alternative locations would exert minor positive impacts via income generated by use of local utilities.
- **Hazardous Materials and Solid Waste.** The proposed use of a diesel-operated emergency generator, storage of fuel, and general office cleaning products would exert minor impacts from hazardous materials. Solid waste generated during operation of the facility would exert minor impacts.
- **Recreational Resources.** The Preferred Location would not adversely affect the recreational resources of the area because no public recreational resources are on site. Minimal positive impacts would occur on the adjacent fairgrounds due to addition of staff and increased fair revenue. Alternative 3 would exert similar impacts. The residential area adjacent to Alternative 2 would be disrupted during construction and emergency events. Alternative 4 would not impact recreational resources on site.
- **Visual and Aesthetic Resources.** The Preferred Location would exert negligible impacts because of existing commercial development in the surrounding area. Alternative 2 would exert minor positive impacts because of the renovation of an existing older building. Alternative 3 would exert negligible impacts because a tree line buffer would be left between the new facility and the adjacent residential community. Alternative 4 would exert negligible impacts because the area is highly commercialized and the site is already cleared and paved.

4. Mitigation Measures

Mitigation measures would be incorporated into the design, construction, and operations of the Proposed Action to further minimize the potential impacts identified in this EA. Also, NOAA would use adaptive management to implement changes to the following mitigation measures, as necessary, if such changes are deemed appropriate during project implementation. The following mitigation measures would be implemented, as necessary:

- If any items of potential cultural, historical, or archaeological significance are unearthed or otherwise discovered during construction activities, work would cease at once and the Alabama Historical Commission (AHC) would be informed.

- To limit potential temporary noise effects during construction, construction and/or renovation of the proposed building(s) would be limited to daytime hours consistent with local ordinances and restrictions. In addition, construction vehicle idling would be limited as much as possible.

- Construction scheduling and movement of heavy, slow-moving vehicles and equipment would be coordinated with local officials to minimize traffic disturbances.

- Mitigation measures associated with accepted LEED strategies would be implemented.

- Straw bales, silt fencing, or other temporary erosion and sediment control devices would be used during construction, if appropriate. Such measures would help minimize any surface runoff from disturbed areas and protect nearby areas from runoff during rain events.

- Best management practices (BMP) would be incorporated in a stormwater management plan prepared for the proposed project site.

- Clear site limitation fences or markers would be used to ensure that construction crews are aware of project area boundary limits.

- As applicable, drip pans or mats would be used for any heavy construction equipment left on site. For any temporary on-site storage of fuels, lubricants, solvents, or other hazardous materials during construction, impermeable mats or temporarily approved storage sheds would be used. For any fuel tanks on site during construction, appropriate containment measures would be used. A Spill Prevention, Containment, and Countermeasure (SPPC) Plan will be prepared and implemented for the permanent above ground storage tank that will store diesel fuel for the operation of the emergency generator.

- The construction contractor would be required to have and post on site a site-specific plan and procedures for stowing, securing, or removing construction equipment, materials, and debris in the event of anticipated major storm events.

- Construction activities would be avoided during nesting or breeding seasons.

- Work would stop if threatened or endangered species are observed.

5. Public Involvement

NOAA coordinated with the following agencies during development of the EA: AHC, USFWS (Ecological Services Field Office), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Mobile District), NOAA Fisheries Service (Southeast Regional Office – Habitat Conservation Division), ADEM, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, City of Mobile (Urban Development – Planning), Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, Mississippi Band of Choctaw, Poarch Band of Creek Indian, Muscogee Creek Nation, and Thloco Tribal Town. NOAA informed stakeholders and encouraged input into the NEPA process. NOAA advertised the availability of the Draft Final EA, and the public comment period, by notice in the

Press Register, newspaper publication. Notice was published on April 20, 2009, providing information on where and how to view the Draft Final EA, information about the public comment period, and point of contact information for submitting comments. Copies of the Draft Final EA were sent to the Mobile West Regional Library, 5555 Grelot Road, Mobile, Alabama 36609-3643. A 30-day comment period, from April 20 through May 22, 2009, was provided, during which time no public comments were received.

6. Conclusion and NOAA Finding

After careful and thorough consideration of the analyses presented in the EA, the undersigned NOAA official finds that the proposed federal action is consistent with existing national environmental policies and objectives set forth in Sections 101(a) and 101(b) of NEPA, and will not significantly affect the quality of the natural or human environment or otherwise result in any condition requiring consultation pursuant to Section 102(2)(c) of NEPA. As described in Section 5.03.c of NOAA Administrative Order 216-6, a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is supported and appropriate for the Proposed Action. Accordingly, preparation of an environmental impact statement for this action is not necessary.

William F. Broglie
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National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

6/17/2009
Date