



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE

Southeast Regional Office
9721 Executive Center Drive N.
St. Petersburg, Florida 33707
(727) 570-5317, FAX 570-5300

July 18, 2002

Rear Admiral Jan C. Gaudio
Department of the Navy
Commander, Navy Region Southeast
Box 102, Naval Air Station
Jacksonville, Florida 32212-0102

Dear Rear Admiral Gaudio:

This responds to your letter of June 19, 2002, (Ser N46E/0197) which transmitted the Essential Fish Habitat Assessment (EFHA) for the U.S. Navy Composite Training Unit Exercise scheduled for September 2002 at the Vieques Inner Range. The EFHA initiates Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) consultation as required by §305(b)(2) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. The Navy concludes that the combined training exercise will not have a significant adverse affect on EFH or Federally-managed species within the Inner Range and requests our expedited concurrence with this finding.

The EFH consultation concluded for a prior training exercise in late March to early April 2002 raised issues similar to the ones inherent in the proposed training exercise. By letter of February 28, 2002, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) provided EFH Conservation Recommendations and the Navy agreed to these recommendations by letter of March 5, 2002. The mitigation measures specified in Section 5.1, page 15 of the Navy's June 2002 EFHA and agreement with the NMFS EFH Conservation Recommendations of February 28, 2002, adequately address our concerns with the proposed training exercise. We request, however, that the mitigation plan for this exercise also specify that where practicable, beach landing zones avoid areas fringed by seagrass beds.

In view of the above, we concur with the Navy's EFHA.

Sincerely,


Andreas Mager, Jr.
Assistant Regional Administrator
Habitat Conservation Division

