

DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
for
ST. GEORGE ISLAND CHANNEL FEDERAL NAVIGATION PROJECT
PROPOSED PLACEMENT AREA ADDITION
APALACHICOLA BAY, FRANKLIN COUNTY, FLORIDA
A FEDERALLY AUTHORIZED PROJECT



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Acronyms and Abbreviations

CAA	Clean Air Act
CEQ	Council on Environmental Quality
CFR	Code of Federal Register
EA	Environmental Assessment
EFH	Essential Fish Habitat
EO	Executive Order
F	Fahrenheit
FDEP	Florida Department of Environmental Protection
GRBO	Gulf Regional Biological Opinion
MLLW	Mean Lower Low Water
NAAQS	National Ambient Air Quality Standards
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NMFS	National Marine Fisheries Service
NOAA	National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration
O&M	Operation and Maintenance
PCEs	Primary Constituent Elements
PRD	Protected Resources Division
SAV	Submerged Aquatic Vegetation
SHPO	State Historic Preservation Officer
USACE	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
USEPA	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
USFWS	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
WQC	Water Quality Certification

**DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT PROPOSED MAINTENANCE DREDGING
AND PLACEMENT OF DREDGED MATERIAL
ST. GEORGE ISLAND CHANNEL
APALACHICOLA BAY, FRANKLIN COUNTY, FLORIDA**

1. INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Mobile District is proposing an additional placement area of the St. George Island Channel Navigation Project in order to facilitate navigation. This Environmental Assessment (EA) has been prepared to address potential impacts associated with the proposed project. The proposed placement site is located on the gulf side beach area west of the current beach placement of the St. George Island Channel, Apalachicola Bay, in Franklin County, Florida. (Figure 1).

1.1 Project Authorization

The St. George Island Channel, locally known as Bob Sikes Cut, is located within the Apalachicola Bay Aquatic Preserve, near the city of Apalachicola, Franklin County, Florida (Figure 1). The Apalachicola Bay is a shallow coastal plain lagoon-estuary system that encompasses an area of approximately 160 square miles (Isphording, 1985). With the initial construction of the project in 1954, the channel separated St. George Island into two islands named St. George Island and Little St. George Island. USACE completed the existing project in April 1957 with the construction of two jetties on the Gulf side and a channel dredged to a depth of 10 feet. The north end of the channel is within class II waters conditionally approved for shellfish harvesting and the south end is within class III waters. The St. George Island Channel Navigation Project is a part of the federally authorized Apalachicola Bay Project (USACE, 1974). This part of the overall project is described as a channel 100 feet wide from the 10-foot depth contour in Apalachicola Bay, across St. George Island, within 300 feet of the Gulf shoreline, thence increasing uniformly in width to 200 feet at the shore and continuing with that width to a 10-foot depth contour in the Gulf of Mexico with twin jetties extending from the dune line to outer (southern) end of the channel. The existing project was authorized by the River and Harbor Acts of 3 September 1954 (H. Doc. 557, 1954), 3 July 1958, and prior acts.

2. NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT CONSIDERATIONS

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Title 40 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Parts 1500-1508 (40 CFR §1500-1508, 2020), require Federal agencies to consider the potential environmental consequences of proposed actions and alternatives. An EA is prepared for an action that is not clearly categorically excluded but does not clearly require an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) [40 CFR §1501.3 (a) and (b)]. Based on the EA, the Federal agency either prepares an EIS, if one appears warranted, or issues a "Finding of No Significant Impact" (FONSI), which satisfies the NEPA requirement. This EA is prepared according to the Engineer Regulation (ER) 200-2-2, Procedures for Implementing NEPA, and the Council for Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (40 CFR § 1508.27) for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA (40 CFR § 1500-1508). This EA is being prepared in accordance with the 2022 Phase I CEQ NEPA revisions.

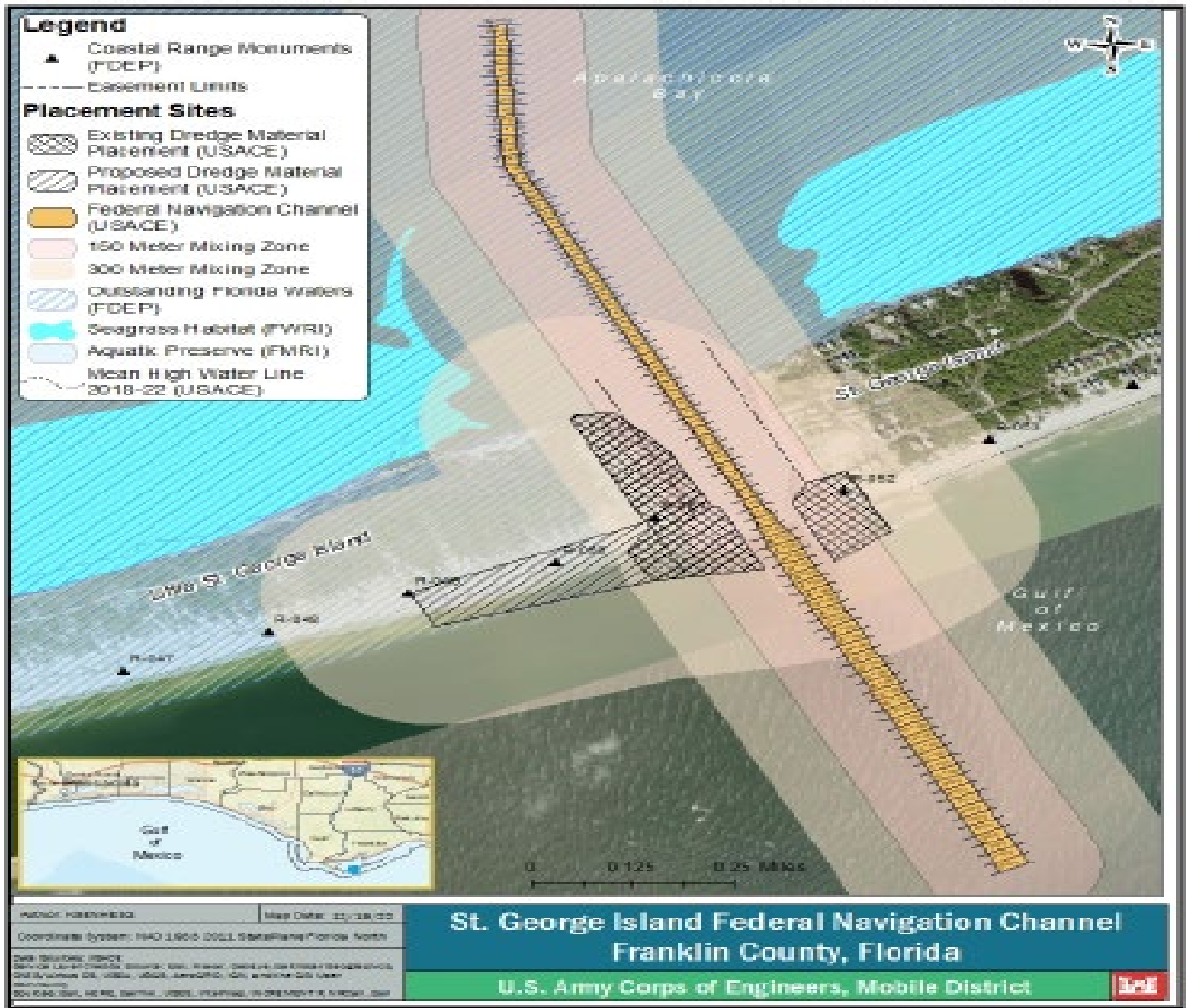


Figure 1: St. George Island Federal Navigation Project Vicinity Map and Proposed Dredge Material Placement

3. ENVIRONMENTAL BACKGROUND

The St. George Island Federal Navigation Project was the subject of an EIS which was filed with the President's CEQ on 9 February 1976 under the subsequent Apalachicola Bay, Florida Navigation Project. In 2005, an EA was prepared to maintain the authorized depth of St. George Island in order to facilitate navigation into and out of Apalachicola Bay.

4. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

The purpose of the proposed action is to provide an additional placement area at the project site of the St. George Island Channel to minimize shoaling and facilitate navigation into and out of Apalachicola Bay.

5. PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action consists of providing an additional material placement area for the maintenance dredging of the federally authorized St. George Island Channel. Dredging will extend to a total depth of 14 feet mean lower low water (MLLW), which includes 2 feet of advanced maintenance and 2 feet allowable over depth. The method of placement for this action involves dredging with a hydraulic pipeline dredge. Floating pipelines will be used to transport approximately 150,000 cubic yards of dredged material to two previously used placement sites and the proposed placement area that is along the shoreline (Figure 2). Temporary berms will be constructed on the beach to direct the dredged material away from sensitive areas or to manage the placement of material within the site.

The proposed disposal area would extend from approximately 0 MLLW to +6 feet MLLW or the existing vegetation line, whichever is lower, and tie into the existing sand dunes. Riprap may at times, be replenished and/or repositioned to maintain the effectiveness of the jetties. Approximately 150,000 thousand cubic yards of sand will be dredged on a three to five-year cycle depending upon weather conditions, availability of funding, and behavior of subsequently. The principal sediment types associated with St. George Island Channel are generally in the category of fine to medium-grained sand. (Institute, 1977).



Figure 2: St. George Island Sikes Cut Existing Placement Site

6. ALTERNATIVE TO THE PROPOSED ACTION

6.1 No Action Alternative

Alternative 1: NEPA defines a No Action as the continuation of existing conditions in the affected environment without the implementation, or in the absence of the proposed action. Inclusion of the No Action alternative is prescribed by the CEQ regulations as the benchmark against which Federal actions are to be evaluated. The implementation of the "no action" alternative would result in increased shoaling and limitation of placement of dredged material from the federally authorized St. George Island Channel. This alternative would not provide the necessary conditions for safe navigation of commercial and recreational boats through the channel. Therefore, the "no action" alternative was deemed unacceptable.

6.2 Proposed Action

The proposed action is described in Section 5.

7. GENERAL SETTINGS

7.1 Environment

The St. George Island Channel, located within the Apalachicola Bay, provides safe navigational access in and out of the bay. The current dredging project will consist of maintaining the channel that separates St. George Island into two islands named St. George Island and Little St. George Island, also known as Cape St. George Island State Preserve. Disposal operations which include beach nourishment, will aid in reducing shoreline erosion and provide greater storm protection thus improving the size and quality of habitat for shoreline wildlife.

7.2 Climate

The project area is located in a humid subtropical climate region, characterized by temperate winters, warm summers, and rainfall that is fairly evenly distributed throughout the year. Prevailing southerly winds provide moisture for high humidity from May through September. Annual temperatures range from 40° to 90° Fahrenheit (F), with a normal mean annual temperature of 68°F along the coast. Normal precipitation ranges from about 50 to 60 inches per year. Of this, 30 inches or 53 percent falls in the summer rainy season from June through September. About 30 percent falls in the winter rainy season from late December through April. May, October, and November are normally the driest months (NRCS, 1994).

7.3 Hydrology Water Resources

There is an abundant supply of both surface and groundwater along the coastline of the Florida panhandle. The project is located within the Apalachicola Bay with two major groundwater systems located in the general vicinity, the Surficial and the Floridan Aquifer System. The Surficial Aquifer System is composed on quartz, clayey sand, and clay which is primarily fed by rainwater. The Floridian system is composed of limestone and provides 90 percent of the public and private water needs of the lower basin.

The Apalachicola Bay is the lower extent of the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint (ACF) rivers basin, which covers over 20,000 square miles of Georgia, Alabama, and Florida. Within this basin, the watershed encompasses about 2,850 square miles of northwest Florida.

The Apalachicola Bay water depths range from -6 to -9 feet at MLLW. The major freshwater inflow to the bay is the Apalachicola River which has an average flow rate of 26,380 cubic feet per second. Headwaters for this alluvial river system originate in the Blue Ridge physiographic province (NOAA, 1997).

7.4 Geology and Soils

The entire Apalachicola coast is thought to have been developed by the Apalachicola River during the late Tertiary and Quaternary periods and has been modified by waves and longshore drift. According to Zeh (Zeh, 1980) the present barrier island chain formation, including St. George Island, is estimated to have occurred approximately 5,000 years ago. St. George Island is built up of older beach, dune ridges and old dune fields that date from approximately 3,000 to 6,000 years before the present. The sediments consist entirely of quartz sands that are believed to rest upon an eroded Pleistocene or Miocene surface. These sands were originally derived from source areas in the Appalachian Piedmont. The principal sediment type found on the island is fine to medium grained sand. Sand size analysis of the Apalachicola Bay in the channel alignment indicated that the median diameter of the sampled sand is approximately 0.23 mm. This estimated size is the same as the median diameter of the sand at MLW within the St. George Island Channel. Sampling of sand in the jetty section indicated that the coarsest sand at approximately 0.29 mm was found in the middle of the channel (Isphording, 1985).

8. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

8.1 Water Quality

The surface water within the limits of the project is generally classified as estuarine. The Bay receives freshwater from the Apalachicola River, which is Florida's largest river, and saltwater from the Gulf of Mexico. Salinity levels throughout most of the Apalachicola Bay are relatively low due to large river inflows. The circulation within the Apalachicola Bay estuary is wind and astronomical tide driven. River water entering the estuary mixes with Gulf of Mexico water and eventually flows through five inlets including the St. George Island Channel. Based on a review of the Three-Dimensional Modeling of Circulation and Salinity for the Low River Flow Season in Apalachicola Bay Report (Huang, 1997) and the salinity standards by National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), salinity levels in estuaries should range from 0.5 parts per thousand (ppt) to 35 ppt. The data, presented in the modeling study, establishes the highest salinity concentration in the Sikes Cut area is 24-26 ppt. Therefore, salinity levels are in the required range with minor/insignificant effect to the water quality within the project area.

8.2 Air Quality

The Clean Air Act (CAA) requires the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) to set National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for pollutants considered harmful to public health and the environment. NAAQS include two types of air quality standards.

Primary standards protect public health, including the health of sensitive populations, such as asthmatics, children, and the elderly. Secondary standards protect public welfare, including protection against decreased visibility and damage to animals, crops, vegetation, and buildings. USEPA has established NAAQS for six principal pollutants, which are called “criteria pollutants.” Criteria pollutants include carbon monoxide, lead, nitrogen dioxide, particulate matter, ozone, and sulfur dioxide. Areas that meet the air quality standard for the criteria pollutants are designated as being “in attainment.” Areas that do not meet the air quality standard for one of the criteria pollutants may be subject to the formal rule-making process and designated as being “in non-attainment” for that standard.

Franklin County is in attainment with the NAAQS of the CAA (EPA, 2022). Therefore, the county is meeting air quality standards for all criteria pollutants.

8.3 Biological Resources

8.3.1 Wetlands

There are no wetlands located in the footprint of the project area. However, there are wetlands outside of the existing breakwater of the containment cell. The typical vegetation around Apalachicola Bay area is composed mainly of tall grass species, such as, *Spartina cynosuroides* (big cordgrass), *Spartina alterniflora* (smooth cordgrass), and *Juncus roemerianus* (black needlerush) (Livingston, 1974).

8.4 Aquatic Environment

8.4.1 Benthos, Motile Invertebrates, and Fishes

The estuarine seagrass beds within the Apalachicola Bay serve as a nursery for benthic species such as the gastropod mollusk (*Neritina reclivata*) and epibenthic species (*Odotpmia sp.*, *Gammarux macronmucronatus*) and mysids (*Taphromysis bowmani*). Infaunal assemblages are dominated by polychaetes (*Loandalia americana*, *Mediomastus bonnieroides*) and chironomid larvae (*Dicrotendipes sp.*). In higher salinity grassbed areas epifaunal macroinvertebrates are dominated by *Hargaria rapax*, *Ampelisca vadorum* and infaunal *Heteronmastus filiformis*. Some common invertebrates found in the bay are blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*), horseshoe crab (*Limulus polyphemus*), pink shrimp (*Farfantepenaeus duorarum*), grass shrimp (*Palaemon floridanus*), and scallops (*Argopecten irradians*). Their densities are bimodal, peaking in the winter and summer months. The bay region produces 90% of the commercial oyster (*Crassostrea virginica*) harvest in the state of Florida. The grassbeds are also characterized by the year-round presence of larval and juvenile nekton. Muddy, soft bottom substrates which comprise about 78% of the open water zone of the bay system are inhabited primarily by polychaetes (*Mediomastus ambiseta*, *Steblospio benedicti*) and amphipods (*Grandidierella bonnieroides*). Areas around the mouth of the river have much higher numbers of infaunal macroinvertebrates than areas outside of the region of general flow. Such differences have been attributed to deposition of nutrients and detritus by the river during periods of flooding, and increased activity and abundance of the benthic macroinvertebrates. Numerous fish species occur within Apalachicola Bay and the Gulf of Mexico with the most common including the striped bass (*Morone*

saxatilis), Alabama shad (*Alosa alabamae*), bullhead catfish (*Ameiurus nebulosus*), white bass (*Morone chrysops*), Gulf sturgeon (*Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi*), sunfish (*Lepomis macrochirus*), Gulf flounder (*Paralichthys albigutta*), striped mullet (*Mugil cephalus*), red snapper (*Lutjanus campechanus*), and black sea bass (*Centropristis striata*) (USACE, 1974).

The highest abundance of fishes within the boundaries of the bay from February through April are juvenile spot (*Leiostomous xanthurus*) and Atlantic croaker (*Micropogonias undulatus*). The overall species numbers tend to be lowest during high river flow, winter, and highest during low flow, summer and fall (Livingston R. , 1997). In Apalachicola Bay, distribution is often related to seasonal fluctuations of temperature, salinity, and other factors related to river flow. Despite the seasonal change of dominant species, the community structure remains stable throughout the year.

8.4.2 Oysters

There are no oyster reefs located within the project area. Oyster reefs of commercial importance are subtidal and form aggregates that cover thousands of acres of bay bottom throughout the region along coastal Florida. Since 1980, reported landings of oysters in Florida ranged from about 1 to 6.5 million pounds with highest landings reported in the early 1980s which were around 6.5 million pounds. Reported oyster landings for Apalachicola Bay for 2012 were approximately 2.4 million pounds which was a slight increase over 2011. Apalachicola Bay accounts for about 90% of Florida's landings.

8.4.3 Submerged Aquatic Vegetation

Submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) found within the Apalachicola Bay system includes eelgrass (*Zostera capricorni*), turtle grass (*Thalassia testudina*), manatee grass (*Syringodium filiforme*), and Cuban shoalweed (*Diplanthera wrightii*) (USACE, 1974) SAV is located on both sides of the Channel within the St. George Island Channel (Figure 3).

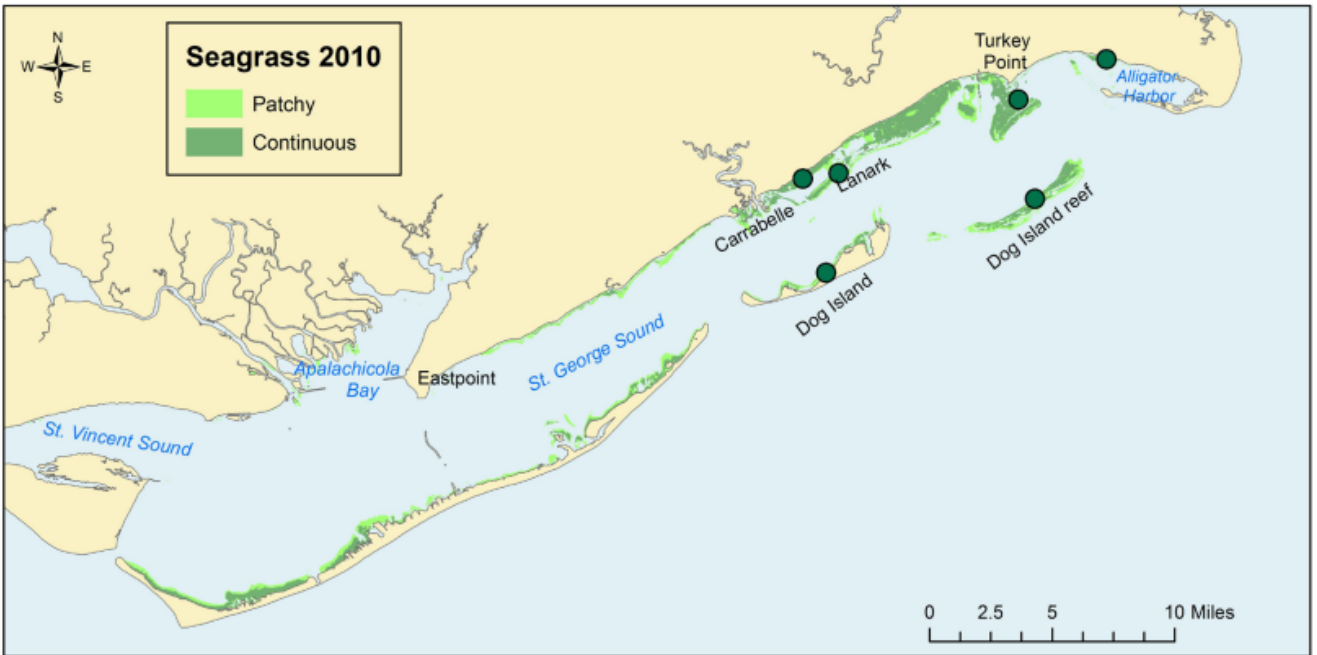


Figure 3: Seagrass Locations

8.4.4 Essential Fish Habitat

Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) is defined in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act as.. "those waters and substrates necessary to fish for spawning, breeding, feeding or growth to maturity." The designation and conservation of EFH seek to minimize adverse effects on habitat caused by fishing and non-fishing activities. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has identified EFH habitats for the Gulf of Mexico in its Fishery Management Plan Amendments (see Table 1). The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Plan (2017) identifies EFH to be estuarine emergent wetlands, seagrass beds, vegetated and non-vegetated bottoms, shell reefs, and the estuarine water column. These habitats also include algal flats, mud, sand, shell, and rock substrates. The habitat in the project area, which is located between two barrier islands in the Apalachicola Bay system, consists of estuarine waters, sand and shell substrates.

Management Plan	Common Name	Scientific Name
Coastal Migratory Pelagic	King mackerel	<i>Scomberomorus cavella</i>
	Spanish mackerel	<i>Scomberomorus maculatus</i>
	Cobia	<i>Rachycentron canadum</i>
Red Drum	Red drum	<i>Sciaenops ocellatus</i>
Snappers	Queen snapper	<i>Etelis oculatus</i>
	Mutton snapper	<i>Lutjanus analis</i>
	Blackfin snapper	<i>Lutjanus buccanella</i>
	Red snapper	<i>Lutjanus campechanus</i>
	Cubera snapper	<i>Lutjanus cyanopterus</i>
	Gray (Mangrove) snapper	<i>Lutjanus griseus</i>
	Lane snapper	<i>Lutjanus synagris</i>
	Silk snapper	<i>Lutjanus vivanus</i>
	Yellowtail snapper	<i>Ocyurus chrysurus</i>
	Wenchman	<i>Pristipomoides aquilonaris</i>
	Vermillion snapper	<i>Rhomboplites aurorubens</i>
Tilefishes	Goldface tilefish	<i>Caulolatilus chrysops</i>
	Blueline tilefish	<i>Caulolatilus microps</i>
	Tilefish	<i>Lopholatilus chamaeleonticeps</i>
Jacks	Greater amberjack	<i>Seriola dumerili</i>
	Lesser amberjack	<i>Seriola fasciata</i>
	Almaco jack	<i>Seriola rivoliana</i>
	Banded rudderfish	<i>Seriola zonata</i>
Triggerfishes	Gray triggerfish	<i>Balistes capriscus</i>
Hogfish	Hogfish	<i>Lachnolaimus maximus</i>
Shrimp	Brown shrimp	<i>Penaeus aztecus</i>
	White shrimp	<i>Penaeus setiferus</i>
	Pink shrimp	<i>Penaeus duorarum</i>
	Royal red shrimp	<i>Pleoticus robustus</i>
	Seabob shrimp	<i>X. kroyeri</i>
Spiny Lobster	Caribbean spiny lobster	<i>Panulirus argus</i>
	Slipper lobster	<i>S. latus</i>
Coral and Coral Reefs	Hydrozoa corals (stinging and hydrocorals)	* There are over 140 species of corals listed in the Coral Fishery Management Plan. Taxonomy is undergoing review and will be updated in Coral Amendment 7.
	Anthozoa (stony and black corals)	
Groupers	(Atlantic) Goliath grouper	<i>Epinephelus itajara</i>
	Red grouper	<i>Epinephelus morio</i>
	Yellowedge grouper	<i>Hyporthudus flavolimbatus</i>
	Warsaw grouper	<i>Hyporthudus nigritus</i>
	Snowy grouper	<i>Hyporthudus niveatus</i>
	Black grouper	<i>Mycteroperca bonaci</i>
	Yellowmouth grouper	<i>Mycteroperca interstitialis</i>
	Gag grouper	<i>Mycteroperca microlepis</i>
	Scamp grouper	<i>Mycteroperca phenax</i>
Yellowfin grouper	<i>Mycteroperca venenosa</i>	

Table 1: Managed Fisheries for the Gulf of Mexico

Several species listed in the table may occur in the Apalachicola Bay; although some species such as blueline tilefish, silk snapper, snowy grouper, rock shrimp and other species are found in deeper waters offshore and would not occur in the project area. No coral species are found near the project area.

8.4.5 Threatened and Endangered Species

Table 2 identifies the federally listed species that may be found within the Florida-Gulf and Franklin County, Florida by NMFS Protected Resources Division (PRD) as either threatened, endangered, within the Gulf of Mexico.

Species	Scientific Name	Status
Blue whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>	E
Finback whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	E
Humpback whale	<i>Megaptera novaengliae</i>	E
Right whale	<i>Eubalaena glacialis</i>	E
Sei whale	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>	E
Sperm whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	E
Green sea turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>	E
Hawksbill sea turtle	<i>Eretmochelys imbricate</i>	E
Kemp's ridley sea turtle	<i>Lepidochelys kempii</i>	E
Leatherback sea turtle	<i>Dermochelys coriacea</i>	E
Loggerhead sea turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>	T
Gulf sturgeon	<i>Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi</i>	T
Smalltooth sawfish	<i>Pristis pectinate</i>	E
Giant Manta ray	<i>Manta birostris</i>	T

Table 2: Threatened and Endangered Species under NMFS-PRD Purview

Table 3 provides the species listed for Franklin County by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) as either threatened, or endangered.

Species	Scientific Name	Status
Flatwoods salamander	<i>Ambystoma cingulatum</i>	T
Loggerhead sea turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>	T, CH
Green sea turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>	E
Leatherback sea turtle	<i>Dermochelys coriacea</i>	E
Hawksbill sea turtle	<i>Eretmochelys imbricate</i>	E
Kemp's ridley sea turtle	<i>Lepidochelys kempii</i>	E
Eastern indigo snake	<i>Drymarchon corais couperi</i>	T
Piping plover	<i>Charadrius melodus</i>	T, CH
Red knot bird	<i>Calidris canutus rufa</i>	T, P
Purple bankclimber clam	<i>Elliptoideus sloatianus</i>	T
Fat three ridge clam	<i>Amblema neislerii</i>	E
Gulf sturgeon	<i>Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi</i>	T, CH
Harper's beauty flowering plants	<i>Harperocallis flava</i>	E
White birds-in-a-nest flowering plants	<i>Macbridea alba</i>	T
Telephus spurge flowering plants	<i>Euphorbia telephioides</i>	T
Florida skullcap flowering plants	<i>Scutellaria floridana</i>	T
Red wolf mammal	<i>Canis rufus</i>	E
Wood stork	<i>Mycteria Americana</i>	E
Red cockaded woodpecker	<i>Picoides borealis</i>	E
West Indian manatee	<i>Trichechus manatus latirostris</i>	E

Table 3: Threatened and Endangered Species Listed by USFWS

None of the above freshwater species are found in the project area due to its coastal setting. Of the four listed plant species, only the Telephus spurge flowering plant (*Euphorbia telephioides*) is found in a coastal setting but only inhabits areas west of this proposed project area on St. Vincent Island. Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) and Leatherbacks sea turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*); Eastern Indigo snake (*Drymarchon*

corais coupen); Red cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*); Wood Stork (*Mycteria americana*); and Red Wolfe Mammal (*Canis rufus*) are not likely to be located in the project area because the area is outside of their preferred habitat. USFWS federally listed species that may be found within the vicinity of the project area only include West Indian manatee (*Trichechus manatus latirostris*), Gulf sturgeon (*Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi*), Piping plovers (*Charadrius melodus*), Red Knot (*Calidris canutus rufa*) and Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), Kemp's ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*) and Green sea turtles (*Chelonia mydas*).

8.4.5.1 Sea Turtles

Sea turtles may be found in the Apalachicola Bay, specifically juvenile and adult Loggerhead, Kemp's Ridley and Green Sea Turtles, as these species are found in bays of coastal Florida foraging and migrating. Sea turtles are known to actively nest on St. George Island from April to October.

The Green Sea turtle is the largest of the hard-shelled turtles weighing up to 870 lbs. Green turtle juveniles and adults are found in inshore and nearshore waters of the Gulf of Mexico from Texas to Florida. In Florida, approximately 99% of green turtle nesting occurs on the Atlantic coast, with most of the activity occurring in the southeastern area of Florida (Valverde R.A., 2017).

The Kemp's ridley turtle is the smallest of the sea turtles, with adults reaching about 2 feet in length and weighing up to 100 pounds. The adult Kemp's ridley has an oval dorsal that is almost as wide as it is long and is usually olive-gray in color. The dredged material will be confined to the open water areas near the channel.

Loggerhead sea turtles are named for their large heads. The adults are slightly larger than Hawksbills but slightly smaller than green sea turtles. Compared to the other sea turtle species, loggerhead sea turtles have the largest geographic nesting range, which includes both temperate and tropical latitudes. The Florida Peninsular subpopulation of loggerheads is the largest nesting aggregation in the Atlantic Ocean, representing about 80% of all nesting and about 90% of all hatchlings in this Distinct Population Segment (Ehrhart et al. 2003; TEWG 2009; Witherington et al. 2009, 2009).

Leatherbacks and Hawksbill Sea turtles are mostly found in tropical areas and are not likely found near the project area.

The material being removed from the channel has been deposited through littoral drift from adjacent beaches; therefore, the material to be placed on the beach is consistent with existing beach material. It is believed that the proposed dredging and placement activities are not likely adversely affect sea turtles. The continued management of sand within the littoral system will serve to stabilize and enhance the nesting habitat.

8.4.5.2 Gulf Sturgeon

Historically, the Gulf sturgeon occurred from the Mississippi River to Charlotte Harbor, Florida. It still occurs, at least occasionally, throughout this range, but in greatly reduced numbers. River systems where the Gulf sturgeon are known to be viable today

include the Mississippi, Pearl, Escambia, Yellow, Choctawhatchee, Apalachicola, and Suwannee Rivers, and possibly others. Adult fish are bottom feeders, eating primarily invertebrates, including brachiopods, insect larvae, mollusks, worms and crustaceans. Gulf sturgeon are anadromous with reproduction occurring in fresh water.

Most adult feeding takes place in the Gulf of Mexico and its estuaries. St. George Island Channel, also known as Sikes Cut, is excluded from designation as critical habitat (68 Federal Register 13397, 2003). Gulf sturgeon are believed to migrate from the Apalachicola Bay into the Gulf of Mexico following prevailing currents and exiting primarily through the two most western passes called Indian Pass and West Pass (68 Federal Register 13397, 2003). Sub-adult sturgeons do utilize nearshore areas typically below 6.5 feet in depth. The project area constitutes a fraction of the total available forage habitat for the species in Apalachicola Bay.

Critical Habitat Unit 13 Apalachicola Bay: Unit 13 encompasses a total of 168,773 acres within the main body of Apalachicola Bay and the adjacent sounds, bays and nearshore waters of the Gulf of Mexico (Figure 4). This unit provides winter feeding and migration habitat for juvenile and adult species from the Apalachicola River Gulf sturgeon subpopulation. Gulf sturgeons have been documented by sightings, incidental captures, and telemetry studies throughout Apalachicola Bay, East Bay, St. George Sound, St. Vincent Sound, and Indian Lagoon (Odenkirk, 1989). The project site is located within this unit. Temporary loss of this small area does not constitute an adverse modification of Unit 13.

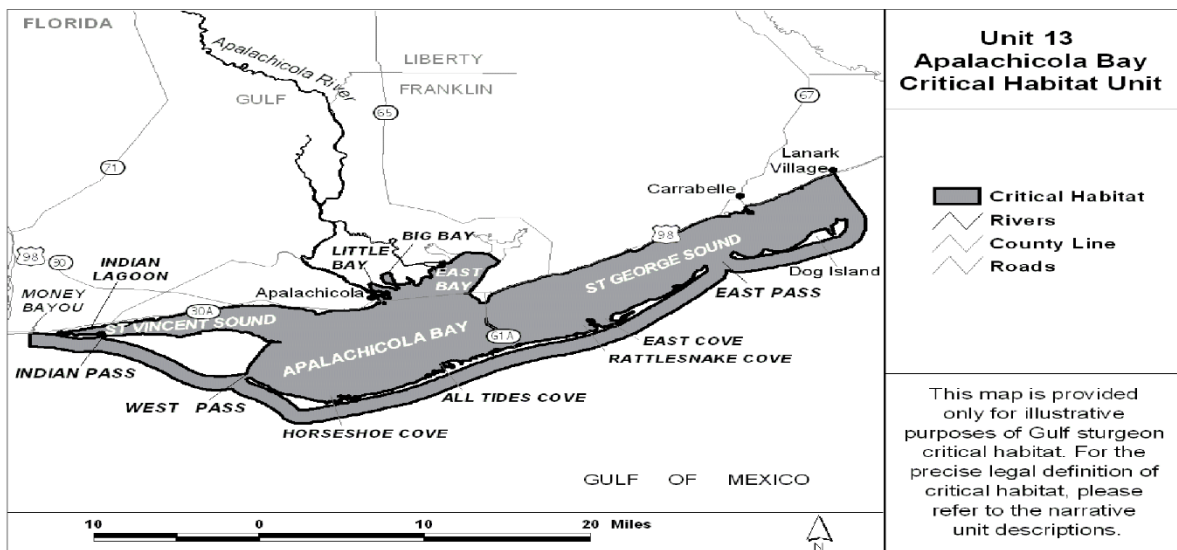


Figure 4: Apalachicola Bay Gulf Sturgeon Critical Habitat Unit 13

8.4.5.3 Piping Plovers and Red Knots

Several migrating birds spend time on the barrier islands in the Gulf, including St. George Island, during the fall and spring while some shorebirds utilize the island year-round. Piping plovers and Red knots begin arriving on the wintering grounds as early as July, with some late-nesting birds arriving in September. Generally, piping plovers favor open sand, gravel, or cobble beaches for breeding. Breeding sites are generally

found on islands, lake shores, coastal shorelines, and river margins. Red knots do not breed in Florida but spend a large portion of their year “wintering” here. All piping plovers are considered a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) when on their wintering grounds. Critical habitat identifies specific areas that are essential to the conservation of a listed species, and that may require special management considerations or protection. The primary constituent elements for the piping plover wintering habitat are those habitat components that are essential for the primary biological needs of foraging, sheltering, and roosting, and only those areas containing these primary constituent elements within the designated boundaries are considered critical habitat. The primary constituent elements are found in coastal areas that support intertidal beaches and flats (between annual low tide and annual high tide) and associated dune systems and flats above annual high tide. Section 7 of the ESA requires Federal agencies to ensure that actions they authorize, fund, or carry out are not likely to adversely modify designated critical habitat (USFWS, 2001). The piping plover critical habitat is located on the east end of St. George Island which is approximately 14 miles away from the project (Figure 5). Red knots occupy habitat located on St. George Island State Park Beach in Franklin County, from Florida Coastal Range Monument 105 to the eastern tip of the island at East Pass.

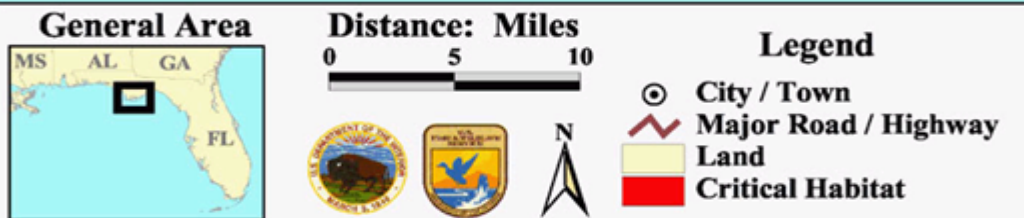
8.4.5.4 Bald Eagle

There is evidence of bald eagle nesting approximately 1,200 feet away from the project site (Figure 6). The operations of the project should not disturb the eagle any more than current navigational traffic through the channel.

8.4.5.5 Western Indian Manatee

West Indian manatees migrate along the Gulf coast from Florida to Louisiana as a seasonal transient species. West Indian manatees migrate through the Apalachicola Bay during the summer months consuming any aquatic vegetation available to them. When the water temperature drops below 71° F they typically migrate into south Florida for food and warmer waters.

General locations of the designated critical habitat for the Wintering Piping Plover.



Use Constraints: This map is intended to be used as a guide to identify the general areas where Wintering Piping Plover critical habitat has been designated. Included within the designation of critical habitat are all land areas to the mean lower low water. Refer to the narrative unit descriptions as the precise legal definition of critical habitat.

Florida Units: 8, 9, 10 and 11

Some locations have been slightly enlarged for display purposes only.

Figure 5: Piping Plover Critical Habitat

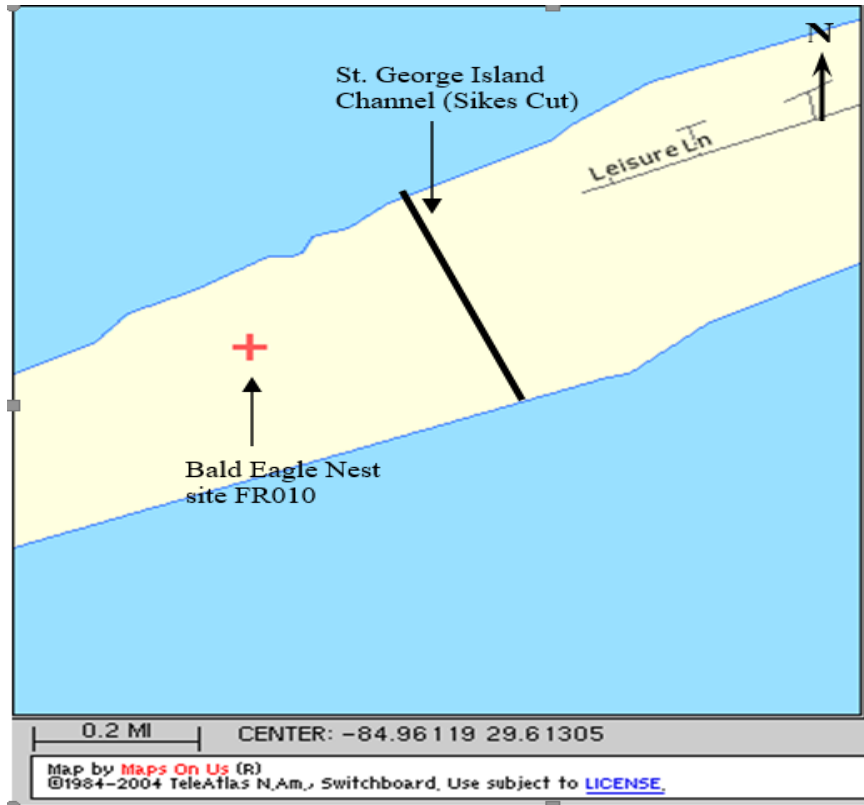


Figure 6: Bald Eagle Location

8.4.5.6 Giant Manta Ray

The species is found in all ocean basins including nearshore waters of the northern Gulf of Mexico. Giant manta rays may occur in deeper waters within their habitat along with sandy bottom areas and seagrass beds in estuarine waters near oceanic inlets, using these waters as potential nursery grounds. Incidental capture of giant manta rarely occurs in the Gulf of Mexico; with the majority released alive.

Although the giant manta ray tends to be solitary, they aggregate to feed on planktonic organisms or to mate, and commonly frequent shallow reefs inshore and offshore. Mantas frequent nearshore waters in front of beaches (at least in Florida) and are known to have appeared in inlets near the project area. However, their mobility allows them to move away from slow moving dredges and relocation trawling vessels.

8.5 Terrestrial Wildlife

St. George Island contains a mixture of salt marshes, sandy coves, oak forests, and slash pines. Marsh areas on the island are located on the east end around the state park. Beach and dune vegetation on the island include a wide variety of shrubs and sea oats. Most of the dunes along the project are generally associated with high-energy shorelines and are continuously shifting and sparsely vegetated. In areas where dunes are stable, plants such as sea oats (*Uniola paniculata*) and dune elder (*Iva imbricata*)

usually establish on the seaward side. On the backside myrtle oak (*Q. myrtifolia*), greenbriar (*Smilax spp.*), slash pine (*Pinus elliotii*), and saw palmetto (*Serenoa spp.*) are characteristic species. The arid conditions and the distance from the mainland limit the amount of wildlife inhabiting the island. The most common inhabitants are raccoons, snakes, and ghost crab. Salt marsh snakes and cottonmouth snakes reside in marsh and bay waters. St. George Island is also a “rest stop” for a wide variety of migrating birds like the Connecticut warbler and piping plover in the fall and spring. Many other shorebirds are found on the island including osprey, least tern, and black skimmer. Osprey are frequently seen fishing around the island waters and nesting on tops of trees.

8.6 Aesthetics

The project area in Apalachicola Bay, Cape St. George Island State Preserve, and areas of St. George Island offer remote and wilderness qualities to provide for a pristine section of beaches that is aesthetically pleasing. The beaches on St. George Island have attracted heavy residential development on the western side where there is a gated community that limits access to the channel by land. The St. George Island State Park, located on the east end of the island, and Cape St. George Preserve are protected from development and contribute to the protection of Apalachicola Bay. The aesthetics of the Apalachicola Coastal Preserve and Cape St. George Preserve makes the area a popular destination for travel, recreation, and fishing. Commercial fishing accounts for approximately half of the county’s employment and recreational fishing is a principal attraction for tourists coming to the region.

8.7 Noise

Noise levels in the area are typical of recreational, boating, and fishing activities. Noise levels fluctuate with the highest levels usually occurring during the spring and summer months due to increased recreational activities.

8.8 Cultural Resources

Cultural resources in the vicinity of Sikes Cut on the St. George Island Federal Navigation Channel consists of prehistoric archaeological sites. Prehistoric Native American sites can include shell middens, artifact scatters and burial mounds that date from ~12000 BCE to AD 1500. Historic era archaeological sites (AD 1500 to present day) often consist of building foundations, dock remains and historic artifact scatters, associated with habitation, exploration, military establishment, commerce, and recreation.

The Florida Master Site File (FMSF) lists two archaeological sites (8FR27 and 8FR888) that are recorded within a one-mile radius of Sikes Cut. These sites, collectively, date from 3,000 to 500 years ago. Archaeological site 8FR27 has been determined potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) and 8FR888 has not been evaluated for NRHP eligibility.

8.9 Recreation

Sikes Cut is a small channel located in the middle of the island, connecting Apalachicola Bay to the Gulf of Mexico. St. George Island is located in Franklin County off the coast of the Florida Panhandle. It is on the same barrier island as Cape St. George Island, is across the Apalachicola Bay from Apalachicola, Florida, and is connected to the Eastpoint on the mainland by the St. George Island Bridge. The island is known for camping, hiking, and swimming that can be done within the St. George Island State Park.

The Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve is used to conserve the shoreline and contribute to the overall protection of Apalachicola Bay and is located northeast of the St. George Island Bridge in Eastpoint, Florida. The Reserve manages more than 90 acres that stretch along the bayshore of St. George Sound and provides opportunities to explore marsh and flatwood habitats and natural communities. Commercial woodlands adjacent to the Apalachicola National Forest provides hunting, camping, sightseeing opportunities and is the largest public recreational area in the county.

9. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Performing an evaluation of environmental impacts for proposed Federal action is a requirement of Federal law (40 CFR §1500-1508, 1515-1518). An impact analysis must be compared to a significance threshold to determine whether a potential consequence of an alternative is considered a significant impact. If the impact is significant, it may be mitigated (i.e., measures are available to reduce the level of impact, so it is no longer significant) or unmitigated. "Significance" under NEPA is determined using two variables: context and intensity. Factors to consider when determining significance include: impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse, degree to which the action affects public health and safety, unique characteristics of the geographic area, degree to which effects may be highly controversial, highly uncertain effects or unique or unknown risks, degree to which action may establish precedent for future actions with significant impacts, etc.

Environmental impacts to the preferred alternative, the proposed action, are minimal or temporary.

9.1 Water Quality

The dredging and placement operations are expected to create an increase of construction-related turbidity in excess of the natural condition in proximity of the channel and placement site. Water quality in the immediate vicinity of the dredge would be slightly impaired for a short period of time due to slight increases in turbidity. The placement of sand on the beach will result in minor increases of turbidity in the nearshore zone during construction. The medium sized sand grains should allow for a short suspension time and containment of sediment during and after construction. Short-term impacts would involve increased, localized turbidity associated with dredging and disposal operations. However, these impacts are expected to be minimal. Suspended particles are expected to settle out within a short time, with no long-term measurable

effects on water quality. During dredging and placement operations, turbidity levels would be monitored to ensure compliance with the state water quality certification. The Consolidated Joint Coastal Permit Number 0245600-005-JC was issued from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) on November 29, 2023, for periodic maintenance dredging of the channel. This permit constitutes a finding of consistency with Florida's Coastal Zone Management Program, as required by Section 307 of the Coastal Zone Management Act. All guidelines would be maintained during the proposed activity. Thus, USACE, Mobile District does not anticipate any adverse impacts as a result of this action.

No Action Alternative: The no action alternative would not cause any long-term adverse impacts to water quality. However, the implementation of the "no action" alternative would result in increased shoaling. The proposed action, adding a new disposal area, provides additional placement for beach nourishment, and reduces shoreline erosion while providing greater shoreline protection.

9.2 Air Quality

The proposed action would have no significant long-term effect on air quality. Air quality in the immediate vicinity of the construction equipment would be slightly affected for a short period of time by the fuel combustion and resulting engine exhausts. The exhaust emissions are considered insignificant in light of prevailing breezes. Any air quality impacts would be temporary and negligible. Franklin County is in attainment with the NAAQS of the CAA (EPA, 2022). Therefore, the county is meeting air quality standards for all criteria pollutants.

No Action Alternative: The no action alternative would not cause any long-term adverse impacts to air quality. However, the implementation of the "no action" alternative would result in increased shoaling. The proposed action, adding a new disposal area, provides additional placement for beach nourishment, and reduces shoreline erosion while providing greater shoreline protection.

9.3 Biological Resources

9.3.1 Wetlands

There are no emergent wetlands located within the footprint of the project area, therefore, there are no significant impacts.

No Action Alternative: The No Action alternative would not cause any long-term adverse impacts to wetlands. However, the implementation of the "no action" alternative would result in no additional beach nourishment. The proposed action, adding a new disposal area, provides additional placement for beach nourishment, and reduces shoreline erosion while providing greater shoreline protection thus improving the size and quality of shoreline habitat.

9.4 Aquatic Resources

9.4.1 Threatened and Endangered Species

The Mobile District has reviewed the list of threatened and endangered species in the project vicinity and made a determination that the proposed activity is not likely to adversely affect any listed endangered and/or threatened species.

Manatees could be in the project area; however, there is not a potential for adverse impacts to occur. These species will likely avoid the immediate project vicinity during dredging or placement operations due to noise from vessels and machinery. However, in the likelihood that a manatee was located in the vicinity of the project site, the “Standard Manatee Construction Conditions” would be implemented throughout the duration of the project.

USACE, Mobile District previously consulted on Gulf sturgeon in addition to its designated critical habitat with National Marine Fisheries Services (NMFS), Protected Resources Division for the operations and maintenance of this Federal navigation channel. A NMFS concurrence letter dated April 5, 2005, indicated the project would not adversely affect Gulf sturgeon or their designated critical habitat. This disposal site addition along the beach from approximately 0 MLLW to +6 feet MLLW is outside of this species habitat, therefore there would be “no effect” to Gulf sturgeon.

The Kemp’s ridley, Green sea turtles, and Loggerhead sea turtles may be found in the project area. The operation and maintenance of St. George Channel includes two previous used and one additional placement area along the shoreline facing the Gulf of Mexico and along the beaches within Sikes Cut. Loggerhead critical habitat is located along the shoreline near the placement areas; however, sea turtles will likely avoid the immediate project vicinity during dredging or placement operations due to noise from vessels and machinery. A hydraulic pipeline dredge will be used to place the material to two previously used placement sites and the proposed placement area. The beneficially used material will be placed to sustain the beach.

Piping plovers and Red knots could be in the project area; however, they will likely avoid the immediate project vicinity during dredging or placement due to noise from vessels and machinery. Piping plovers do not breed in Florida but spend a large portion of their year “wintering” here. The piping plover critical habitat is located on the east end of St. George Island which is approximately 14 miles away from the project. Red knots designated critical habitat, consists of three subunits comprising 2,212 acres of occupied habitat in Franklin and Gulf Counties on beaches of Apalachicola Bay, St. Vincent Sound, Indian Pass, St. Vincent Island, and Flagg Island.

No Action Alternative: Implementation of the no action alternative would not cause any long-term adverse impacts to threatened and endangered species or critical habitat.

9.4.2 Benthos, Motile, Invertebrates, and Fishes

There would be temporary disruption of the aquatic community. Non-motile benthic fauna within the placement and dredging operations will be lost due to the proposed operations but should repopulate within several months after dredging completion. Some of the motile benthic and pelagic fauna, such as crabs, shrimp, and fish are able to avoid the dredging area and should return shortly after the activity is completed. Larval and juvenile stages of these forms may not be able to avoid the activity due to limited mobility. The overall impact to these organisms is expected to be temporary and not significant.

No Action Alternative: Implementation of the no action alternative to the channel would not cause any long-term adverse impacts.

9.4.3 Oysters

There are oyster reefs in Apalachicola Bay but are not within the project area.

No Action Alternative: Implementation of the no action alternative to the channel would continue to infill with sediments. Therefore, with continued shoaling, would result in a loss of additional habitat for marine life and a continued loss to Apalachicola's economy.

Aquaculture Use Zone in Franklin County with Existing Leases

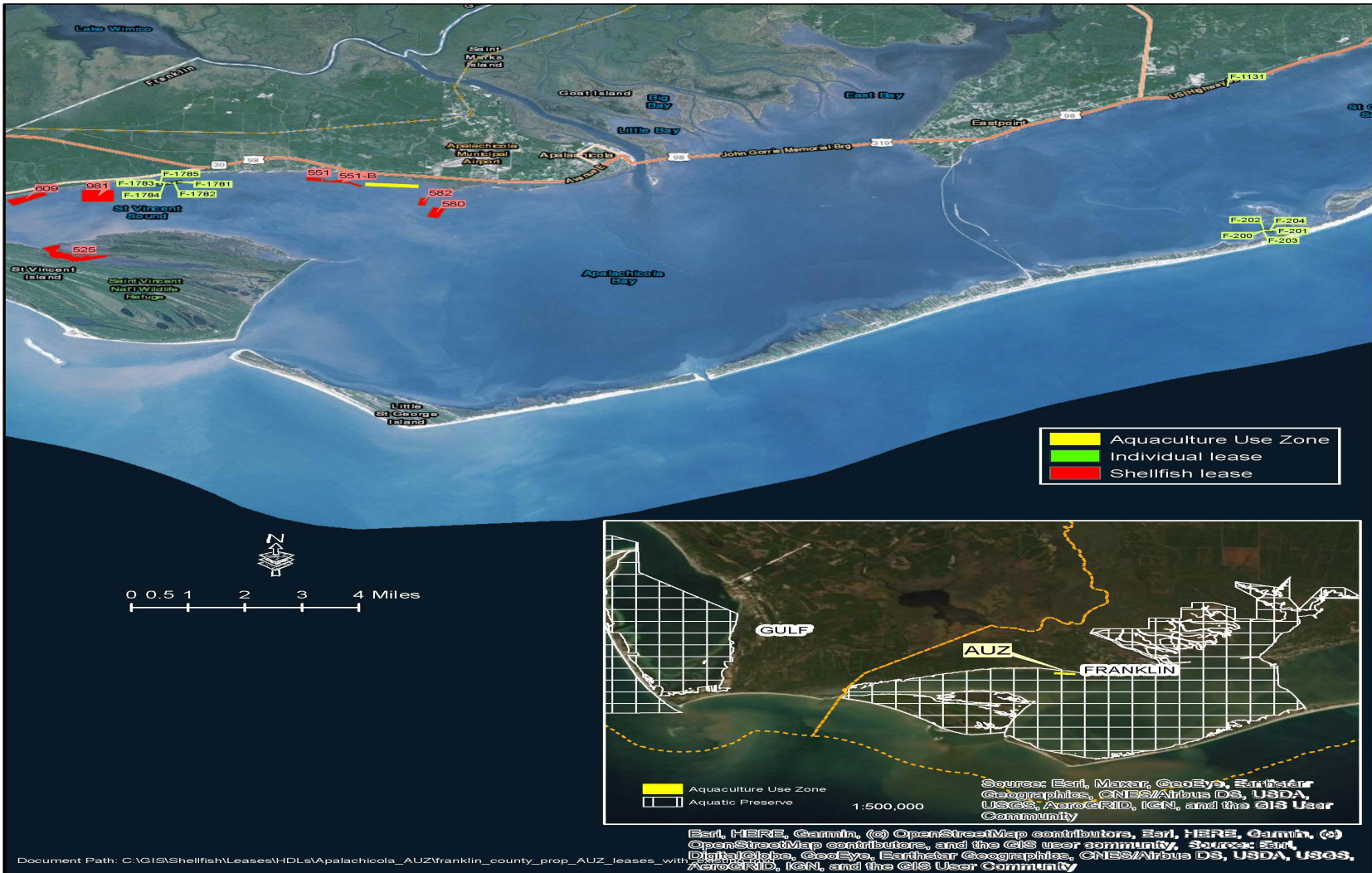


Figure 7: Oyster Propagation Map

9.4.4 Submerged Aquatic Vegetation

Impacts to SAV would involve increased, localized turbidity associated with dredging and disposal operations. However, these impacts are expected to be minimal. The medium sized sand grains should allow for a short suspension time and containment of sediment during and after construction. Floating pipelines will be used to transport the dredged material from the dredge to the beach placement sites which would minimize turbidity. The dredging and disposal would be controlled and monitored. Temporary berms will contain the material during placement activities and direct the dredged material away from sensitive areas within the site. The permit will require turbidity monitoring at the edge of the nearest seagrass bed to reduce potential adverse effects of turbidity on SAV. The permit will also specify a protocol for delineating the seagrass edge to ensure compliance samples will be taken at the appropriate locations.

No Action Alternative: Implementation of the no action alternative would not cause any long-term adverse impacts to SAV.

9.4.5 Essential Fish Habitat

The proposed action will not significantly affect coastal habitat identified as EFH in the project area. No adverse impacts to wetlands, SAVs or shell reefs are anticipated. Turbidity generated in the water column would be temporary, localized, and of a short duration. Most motile benthic species within the project area will likely leave the area upon initiation of dredging operations. The exception is non-motile benthic invertebrates that will be impacted by the project. However, impacts to these species will be insignificant as they will re-colonize the area within a few months.

USACE is coordinating with Habitat Conservation Division of NMFS to ensure that proposed activity will not significantly impact EFH.

No Action Alternative: Implementation of the no action alternative would not cause any long-term adverse impacts to EFH.

9.5 Aesthetics

Access to the project area would be restricted during construction operations. Aesthetics will be temporarily impacted in the immediate vicinity of the proposed project area. Therefore, no significant long-term impacts are likely to occur.

No Action Alternative: Implementation of the no action alternative would result in no impacts to any aspect of aesthetics.

9.6 Noise

Noise from the dredge and other job-related equipment is expected to increase during the proposed operations in the project vicinity. Noise levels will resume to prior conditions once the dredging and disposal operations are complete. No long-term increase in noise will occur in or around the project area.

No Action Alternative: Implementation of the no action alternative would result in no impacts to any aspect of noise in the project area.

9.7 Cultural Resources

According to the Florida Master Site File (FMSF), Phase I terrestrial cultural resources surveys within the Area of Potential Effect (APE) were conducted in 1996 and 1999. Two prehistoric archaeological sites have been recorded, 8FR27 and 8FR888. Archaeological site 8FR27 has been determined potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) and 8FR888 has not been evaluated for NRHP eligibility.

Archaeological site 8FR27 lies on the bay on the eastern side of Sikes cut, over 2000 feet away from the project area. The boundary of archaeological site 8FR888, also on the bay side, is over 700 feet from the western project boundary. Neither of these sites are within the APE for the maintenance dredging of the St. George Island Channel and placement of dredged material in the proposed upland placement area. These sites will not be impacted by this project.

Previous consultation with the Florida State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) for the Saint George Island Federal Navigation Channel occurred in 2006 (DHR2005-2513). The Florida SHPO concurred with the Mobile District's determination of no historic properties affected for the dredging and dredge placement project. An inadvertent discoveries protocol will be required during dredging and placement.

No Action Alternative: Implementation of the no action alternative to the channel would not be impacted. It is unlikely that any cultural resources would be impacted.

9.8 Recreation

The navigation channel used by recreational and commercial boaters would be temporarily unavailable during dredging operations. However, unavailability of the area would be short term in duration and minimal in overall impact. Upon completion of the project, the affected area would quickly return to its full recreational capabilities.

No Action Alternative: Implementation of the no action alternative to the channel would not be impacted. However, the implementation of the "no action" alternative would result in increased shoaling and restrict navigation of the St. George Island Federal Navigation Channel.

10 CUMULATIVE EFFECTS SUMMARY

Federal regulations implementing NEPA (40 CFR Sections 1500-1508) require that the cumulative impacts of a Proposed Action be assessed. NEPA defines cumulative effects as an "impact on the environment which results from the incremental impacts of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions, regardless of what agency (Federal or non-federal) or person undertakes such other actions." Cumulative impacts can result from individually minor but collectively

significant actions taking place over a period of time. This section analyzes the proposed action as well as any connected, cumulative, and similar existing and potential actions occurring in the area and surrounding the site.

Temporary berms will be constructed on the beach to direct the dredged material away from sensitive areas or to manage the placement of material within the site. Temporary impacts to benthic communities are expected to occur; however, benthic communities typically recover or recolonize disturbed sites in six to twelve months. Seagrasses are in the area on both sides of the channel. Incremental impacts from other foreseeable future projects are also expected to have insignificant temporary impacts on water quality, biological, historic, and fishery resources.

USACE, Mobile District is required by Congress to maintain the federally authorized St. George Island Federal Navigation Channel to provide safe navigation for commercial and recreational vessels. This proposed action would restore the current patterns and flow to project conditions. Thus, routine O&M activities associated with the St. George Island Federal Navigation Channel Project are expected to have no significant direct cumulative impacts to biological resources, water chemistry, or oceanographic resources.

11 OTHER PERTINENT ENVIRONMENTAL LAWS AND REGULATIONS

11.1 Clean Water Act

Water Quality Certification under Section 401 of the Clean Water Act was issued on November 29, 2023, under Permit Number, 0245600-005-JC from FDEP to include an additional placement area for the for availability of future dredging and placement of material for the navigation channel. All FDEP guidelines shall be followed during the proposed action. USACE, Mobile District will comply with all permitting conditions, including but not limited to, turbidity sampling and monitoring.

11.2 Protection of Children

Executive Order (EO) 13045, the Protection of Children from Environmental Health Risks and Safety Risks, was issued 23 April 1997. EO 13045 applies to significant regulatory actions that concern an environmental health or safety risk that could disproportionately adversely affect children.

Environmental health risks or safety risks refer to risks to health or to safety that are attributable to products or substances that the child is likely to encounter or ingest. The proposed action would not impact the health and safety of children. Barriers, site workman, and other measures would be implemented to provide protection to non-project workers.

11.3 Environmental Justice

EO 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority and Low-Income Populations (11 February 1994), requires that Federal agencies conduct their programs, policies, and activities that substantially affect human health or the environment in a manner that ensures that such programs, policies, and activities do not have the effect of excluding persons (including populations) from participation in,

denying persons (including populations) the benefits of, or subjecting persons (including populations) to discrimination under such programs, policies, and activities because of their race, color, or national origin. The proposed project is not designed to create a benefit for any group or individuals. The proposed activities do not create disproportionately high or adverse human health or environmental impacts on any low-income populations of the surrounding area. Review and evaluation of the proposed project identified environmental census tract, 12037970304, as disadvantaged for Franklin County. The demographics indicate 79% Caucasian and 14% African American. The threshold criteria exceedances include: Climate change, expected building loss rate and projected flood risk; Energy Cost; Health, heart disease; Housing, lack of indoor plumbing; and Legacy Pollution, formerly used defense sites. Due to the nature of this O&M project, residents nearest to the project would be impacted by an increase of noise temporarily. No other impacts are expected to adversely affect the community by the proposed project.

The Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool (EJSCREEN) on EPA's website was used to determine the environmental and demographic indicators for the project area.

12 COORDINATION

The EA for the proposed additional placement area to provide dredged material for the will be made available for a 30-day public review period through the Public Notice FP24-AB01-11. The notice will be provided to interested public and local, State, and Federal agencies.

13 CONCLUSION

Based on the above discussion, implementation of the proposed action, breach closure activities are projected to have no effects to threatened and endangered species, wetlands, cultural, land use, and fish habitat; and temporary to minor adverse effects to, aesthetics, noise, recreation, sediment, and water quality and eventual beneficial effects to terrestrial wildlife. A FONSI has been prepared and would be signed by the District Commander. Based on the findings of the EA, preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not necessary.

14 LIST OF PREPARERS

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