

to make comments, including names and home addresses of respondents, available for public review during regular business hours. Individual respondents may request that we withhold their home address from the rulemaking record, which we will honor to the extent allowable by law. There also may be circumstances in which we would withhold from the rulemaking record a respondent's identity, as allowable by law. If you wish us to withhold your name and/or address, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your comment. We will make all submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives of officials of organizations or businesses, available for public inspection in their entirety.

Executive Order 12866

Executive Order 12866 requires each agency to write regulations that are easy to understand. We invite your comments on how to make this rule easier to understand including answers to questions such as the following: (1) Are the requirements in the rule clearly stated? (2) Does the rule contain technical language or jargon that interferes with the clarity? (3) Does the format of the rule (e.g., grouping and order of sections, use of headings, paragraphing) aid or reduce its clarity? (4) Is the description of the rule in the **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION** section of the preamble helpful in understanding the rule? What else could we do to make the rule easier to understand?

Send a copy of any comments that concern how we could make this rule easier to understand to: Office of Regulatory Affairs, Department of the Interior, Room 7229, 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, DC 20240. You may e-mail your comments to this address: Exsec@ios.doi.gov

Required Determinations

Regulatory Planning and Review

In accordance with Executive Order 12866, this document is a significant proposed rule because it may raise novel legal or policy issues, and was reviewed by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in accordance with the four criteria discussed below.

(a) This counterpart regulation will not have an annual economic effect of \$100 million or more or adversely affect an economic sector, productivity, jobs, the environment, or other units of government. The counterpart regulation for the evaluation of conservation efforts when making listing decisions does not pertain to commercial products or

activities or anything traded in the marketplace.

(b) This counterpart regulation is not expected to create inconsistencies with other agencies' actions. FWS and NMFS are responsible for carrying out the Act.

(c) This counterpart regulation is not expected to significantly affect entitlements, grants, user fees, loan programs, or the rights and obligations of their recipients.

(d) OMB has determined that this rule may raise novel legal or policy issues and, as a result, this rule has undergone OMB review.

Regulatory Flexibility Act (5 U.S.C 601 et seq.)

Under the Regulatory Flexibility Act (5 U.S.C. 601 *et seq.*, as amended by the Small Business Regulatory Enforcement Fairness Act (SBREFA) of 1996), whenever an agency is required to publish a notice of rulemaking for any proposed or final rule, it must prepare and make available for public comment a regulatory flexibility analysis that describes the effect of the rule on small entities (*i.e.*, small businesses, small organizations, and small government jurisdictions), unless the agency certifies that the rule will not have a significant economic impact on a substantial number of small entities. The Regulatory Flexibility Act requires Federal agencies to provide a statement of the factual basis for certifying that a rule will not have a significant economic impact on a substantial number of small entities.

Pursuant to the Regulatory Flexibility Act, we certified to the Small Business Administration that these regulations would not have a significant economic impact on a substantial number of small entities. The purpose of the rule is to increase the efficiency of the ESA section 7 consultation process for those activities conducted to implement the NFP. The proposed changes will lead to the same protections for listed species as the section 7 consultation regulations at 50 CR part 402 and will only eliminate the need for the Action Agency to conduct informal consultation with and obtain written concurrence from the Service for those NFP actions that the Action Agency determines are "not likely to adversely affect" (NLAA) any listed species or designated critical habitat.

Regulations at 50 CFR 402.04 provide that "the consultation procedures may be superseded for a particular Federal agency by joint counterpart regulations among that agency, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Marine Fisheries Service." The preamble to the 1986 regulations for

implementing section 7 states that "such counterpart regulations must retain the overall degree of protection afforded listed species required by the [ESA] and these regulations. Changes in the general consultation process must be designed to enhance its efficiency without elimination of ultimate Federal agency responsibility for compliance with section 7."

Under the proposed counterpart regulations, the Action Agencies will enter into an Alternative Consultation Agreement (ACA) with either or both of the Services as appropriate. The ACA will include: (1) A list or description of the staff positions within the Action Agency that will have authority to make NLAA determinations; (2) a program for developing and maintaining the skills necessary within the Action Agency to make NLAA determinations, including a jointly developed training program based on the needs of the Action Agency; (3) provisions for incorporating new information and newly listed species or designated critical habitat into the Action Agency's effects analysis on proposed actions; (4) provisions for the Action Agency to maintain a list of fire plan projects that received NLAA determinations under the agreement; and (5) a mutually agreed upon program for monitoring and periodic program evaluations. The purpose of the training program is to ensure the Action Agency consistently interprets and applies the relevant provisions of the ESA and regulations (50 CFR 402), with the expectation that the Action Agency will reach the same conclusion as the Service.

The proposed rule will not have a significant economic impact on a substantial number of small entities for the following reasons: (1) The proposed joint counterpart ESA section 7 regulations only apply to ESA section 7 determinations made by one of the five Federal Action Agencies that implement the NFP; (2) the proposed rule will only remove the requirement for the Action Agencies to conduct informal consultation with and obtain written concurrence from FWS or NMFS on those NFP actions they determine that are NLAA listed species or designated critical habitat; and (3) the proposed regulations are designed to reduce potential economic burdens on the Services and Action Agencies by improving the efficiency of the process. Therefore, we certify that this action will not have a significant economic impact on a substantial number of small businesses, organizations, or governments pursuant to the RFA.