

part 216), the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (ESA; 16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*), and the regulations governing the taking, importing, and exporting of endangered and threatened species (50 CFR parts 222–226).

The applicant proposes to study seven cetacean species in the waters of the northeastern United States as well as Antarctica. The purpose of the research is to investigate the foraging ecology, habitat use, physiology, and acoustic and social behavior of these species to support ecosystem-based management and mitigate anthropogenic harm. Research would be conducted from boats and unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). Animals would be studied using photo-ID, photogrammetry, behavioral observations, collection of fecal samples, skin and blubber biopsy sampling, and suction cup tagging by a pole or UAS. Threatened and endangered species that would be studied if encountered are: fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*), sei whale (*B. borealis*), and North Atlantic right whales (*Eubalaena glacialis*). The permit would be valid for 5 years.

In compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (42 U.S.C. 4321 *et seq.*), an initial determination has been made that the activity proposed is categorically excluded from the requirement to

prepare an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement.

Concurrent with the publication of this notice in the **Federal Register**, NMFS is forwarding copies of the application to the Marine Mammal Commission and its Committee of Scientific Advisors.

Dated: February 9, 2023.

**Julia M. Harrison**,  
Chief, Permits and Conservation Division,  
Office of Protected Resources, National  
Marine Fisheries Service.

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**DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**

**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

[RTID 0648–XC408]

**Magnuson-Stevens Act Provisions; General Provisions for Domestic Fisheries; Application for Exempted Fishing Permits**

**AGENCY:** National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

**ACTION:** Notice; request for comments.

**SUMMARY:** The Assistant Regional Administrator for Sustainable Fisheries, Greater Atlantic Region, NMFS, has

made a preliminary determination that an Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) application contains all of the required information and warrants further consideration. The EFP would allow commercial fishing vessels to fish outside fishery regulations in support of research conducted by the applicant. Regulations under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act require publication of this notification to provide interested parties the opportunity to comment on applications for proposed EFPs.

**DATES:** Comments must be received on or before *March 2, 2023*.

**ADDRESSES:** You may submit written comments by any of the following methods:

- *Email:* [nmfs.gar.efp@noaa.gov](mailto:nmfs.gar.efp@noaa.gov).

Include in the subject line “High-Volume Intelligent Discard Chute EM EFP.”

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Samantha Tolken, Fishery Management Specialist, [Samantha.Tolken@noaa.gov](mailto:Samantha.Tolken@noaa.gov), 978–675–2176.

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** The applicant submitted a complete application for an EFP to conduct commercial fishing activities that the regulations would otherwise restrict. This EFP would exempt the participating vessels from the following Federal regulations:

**TABLE 1—REQUESTED EXEMPTIONS**

Citation	Regulation	Need for exemption
50 CFR 648.80(a)(3)(i) ..	Gulf of Maine Regulated Mesh Area Minimum Mesh Size and Gear Restrictions.	Conduct fishing with the use of 4.5-inch (11.4-cm) diamond mesh intended to facilitate the catch of redfish and 5.1-inch (13-cm) square mesh intended to facilitate the catch of haddock, in order to expand the predictive capabilities of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) program under varying catch compositions.
50 CFR 648.80(a)(4)(i) ..	Georges Bank Regulated Mesh Area Minimum Size and Gear Restrictions.	Conduct fishing with the use of 4.5-inch (11.4-cm) diamond mesh intended to facilitate the catch of redfish and 5.1-inch (13-cm) square mesh intended to facilitate the catch of haddock, in order to expand the predictive capabilities of the AI program under varying catch compositions.
50 CFR 648.81(a)(5) .....	Closed Area II Closure Area .....	Conduct fishing in the non-habitat management area of Closed Area II Closure Area from April 16 through January 31 to vary the areas fished and catch compositions to expand the capability of the AI program and improve predictive power.

**TABLE 2—PROJECT SUMMARY**

Project title .....	High-Volume Audit (HVA) Electronic Monitoring (EM) for Groundfish Vessels Testing an Intelligent Discard Chute.
Applicant .....	A.I.S. Inc.
Project objectives .....	To develop and pilot an innovative solution for electronic monitoring (EM) based on wireless video transfer, edge-based AI processing via intelligent discard chute, and web-based video review to incentivize fleet adoption for high-volume groundfish trawl vessels.
Application date .....	2/8/2023.
Project period .....	5/1/2023–4/30/2024.
Project location .....	Gulf of Maine and Georges Bank.
Number of vessels .....	4.
Number of trips .....	130.
Trip duration (days) .....	7–10 days.

TABLE 2—PROJECT SUMMARY—Continued

Total number of days .....	1,300.
Gear type(s) .....	Bottom trawl.
Number of tows or sets .....	20–25 per trip.
Duration of tows or sets .....	30 minutes–2 hours.

**Project Narrative**

The subject application would study the feasibility of deploying an intelligent discard chute with integrated artificial intelligence (AI) technology for catch accounting onboard high-volume groundfish trawl vessels. The project would determine the optimal design and workflow to minimize costs and maximize precision and accuracy of electronic monitoring (EM) data for size, species, and weight of regulatory discards. This research could significantly reduce the cost of EM programs for large, high-volume groundfish vessels if the intelligent discard chute and AI prove to be an accurate and reliable source for catch accounting. This information could also be used to develop a future High-Volume Audit (HVA) EM program for high-volume vessels, which could incentivize EM adoption in the region.

The subject application would allow up to four high-volume trawl sector vessels enrolled in the Audit Model EM program additional exemptions from 50 CFR 648.80(a)(3)(i) and (a)(4)(i) to conduct fishing using codends with diamond mesh as small as 4.5 inches (11.4 cm) to increase the catch of redfish in the Sector Redfish Exemption Area and conduct fishing using codends with square mesh as small as 5.1 inches (13 cm) to increase the catch of haddock in the Gulf of Maine and Georges Bank. The use of different mesh sizes and gears, leading to various catch compositions, will improve and expand the predictive capabilities of the AI program and the intelligent discard chute on high-volume vessels.

Additionally, vessels would be exempt from the non-habitat management area portion of the Closed Area II Closure Area, from April 16 through January 31, at 50 CFR 648.81(a)(5). This will allow vessel access to an additional fishing area, where catch compositions may differ. The opportunity to encounter varying catch composition will be used to further expand the AI program capabilities and predicative powers.

If approved, the applicant may request minor modifications and extensions to the EFP throughout the year. EFP modifications and extensions may be granted without further notice if they are deemed essential to facilitate

completion of the proposed research and have minimal impacts that do not change the scope or impact of the initially approved EFP request. Any fishing activity conducted outside the scope of the exempted fishing activity would be prohibited.

*Authority:* 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: February 9, 2023.

**Jennifer M. Wallace,**

*Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.*

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**DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**

**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

**Draft Environmental Assessment for the Funding, Procurement, and Operation of NOAA Small Uncrewed Aircraft Systems**

**AGENCY:** Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research (OAR), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Department of Commerce (DOC).

**ACTION:** Notice of availability; request for comments.

**SUMMARY:** NOAA’s Uncrewed Systems Research Transition Office (UxSRTO) in OAR has prepared a Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Funding, Procurement, and Operation of NOAA Small Uncrewed Aircraft Systems (UAS). We are making the draft EA available for public review and comment.

**DATES:** Written comments must be received on or before March 17, 2023.

**ADDRESSES:** The Draft EA is available online at <https://orta.research.noaa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Draft-PEA-for-NOAA-Small-Unmanned-Aircraft-Systems.pdf>. Please submit public comments via email to [UXS.OAR@NOAA.gov](mailto:UXS.OAR@NOAA.gov) with the subject line “Public Comment on Draft EA for UAS.” Please be aware that comments submitted may be posted on a Federal website or otherwise released publicly. Clearly indicate the section, page number, and line number, if applicable, to which submitted comments pertain. All comments must be provided in English. No business proprietary

information, copyrighted information, or personally identifiable information should be submitted. Please note that the U.S. Government will not pay for response preparation, or for the use of any information contained in the response.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Bryan Cole, Director, NOAA Uncrewed Systems Research Transition Office (email: [bryan.cole@noaa.gov](mailto:bryan.cole@noaa.gov) or phone number: 831–601–2107).

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** The UxSRTO is often directly or indirectly involved in the funding, procurement, and operation of small UAS during the course of its normal office functions. The UxSRTO, and its predecessor, the NOAA UAS Program Office in OAR, were formally established to provide guidance and expertise in support of NOAA’s efforts in the testing and development of UAS and to help expand UAS research, development, and transitions to operations and commercialization. The draft EA evaluates the potential impacts on the environment from the types of small UAS platforms and operations commonly supported by the UxSRTO across NOAA, in any environment for which NOAA has a mission and potential need for UAS resources to help meet related mission objectives.

For purposes of the assessment, the use of the term “small UAS” follows suit with the Federal Aviation Administration’s (FAA) definition of “small unmanned aircraft” (14 CFR 107.3), which weigh “less than 55 pounds on takeoff, including everything that is on board or otherwise attached to the aircraft.” The geographic scope of the action area includes the airspace ranging from just above the surface (for launch and recovery), extending upward to an operational altitude of approximately 400 ft. above ground level (AGL) for a majority of applications, but may also include operational altitudes up to as high as 100,000 ft. mean sea level (MSL) for a few others.

UxSRTO proposes that the support for small UAS operations at NOAA, as described in the proposed action, would have no significant impact on the environment. The Draft EA has been prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of