

## Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Proposed Expansion

### JUNE 10, 2016



NOAA opens public comment period on the proposed expansion of Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary.

### PUBLIC COMMENT

The public is invited to submit comments to the agency on the proposed expansion.

Comments on the proposal may be submitted via [www.regulations.gov](http://www.regulations.gov) using docket number NOAA-NOS-2016-0059.

### ENDS

### 8/19/16

### NEXT STEPS



The public, partners and other stakeholders review and comment on the proposed expansion. The deadline for comments is August 19.

#### PUBLIC MEETINGS



NOAA will hold five public meetings in the north central Gulf of Mexico region. See [www.flowergarden.noaa.gov/management/expansiondeis.html](http://www.flowergarden.noaa.gov/management/expansiondeis.html) for dates and locations.

#### FINAL DECISION



NOAA will consider the comments it received on the expansion proposal before making a final decision.

**2-3 year**  
process

Should NOAA decide to proceed with expansion, the agency will prepare final documents.

### Background

Building on more than 30 years of scientific studies, including numerous reports released in the last decade and in the aftermath of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster, NOAA is proposing to expand Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary to protect additional critical Gulf of Mexico habitat.

Located 70 to 115 miles off the coasts of Texas and Louisiana, the sanctuary includes the northernmost coral reefs in the continental United States, deepwater reef communities and other essential habitats for a variety of marine species. In 1992, NOAA designated the East and West Flower Garden Banks as Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary. In 1996, Stetson Bank was added to the sanctuary through Congressional action.

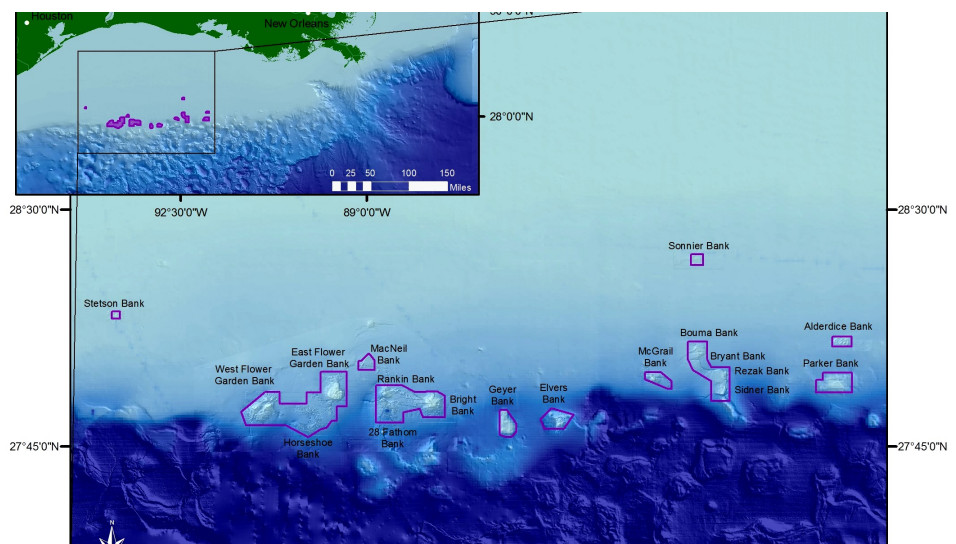
The proposed expansion would provide additional protection and management of habitats that are the engines of sustainability for much of the Gulf of Mexico and are critical to

many recreationally and commercially important fish species, including red snapper, mackerel, grouper and wahoo. These waters are also home to 15 threatened or endangered species of whales, sea turtles and corals.

During a review of the sanctuary's management plan, which was completed in 2012, protecting additional critical habitats in the north central Gulf of Mexico emerged as a priority issue among members of the sanctuary's advisory council. The proposed expansion is also responsive to recommendations by many government and non-governmental organizations urging additional protections for marine life and essential Gulf of Mexico habitats in the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010.

### Why Expand?

Sanctuary goals and objectives stress the importance of ecosystem-based management of the sanctuary's regional environment. Since the sanctuary's designation, the



Map: NOAA

NOAA's preferred option for expanding Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary would add 15 additional banks to the sanctuary.

<http://flowergarden.noaa.gov/management/expansiondeis.html>

Proposed Expansion Alternatives	Resources Present	Subregions of the North Central Gulf of Mexico	Total Area (sq. mi.)
<b>Alternative 1:</b> No action, retain current boundary	Coral reef/coral community; mesophotic coral habitats	NW banks	56.21
<b>Alternative 2:</b> 2007 Sanctuary Advisory Council recommendation	Coral reef/coral community; mesophotic coral habitats	NW banks, continental slope	281.15
<b>Alternative 3:</b> 2015 FGBNMS staff recommendation, NOAA's preferred alternative	Coral reef/coral community; mesophotic coral habitats	NW banks, continental slope	383.19
<b>Alternative 4:</b> Expansion alternative 3 plus high priority mesophotic and deep coral sites	Coral reef/coral community; mesophotic coral habitats; deep coral ecosystems	NW banks; Pinnacles; continental slope	633.76
<b>Alternative 5:</b> Comprehensive protection for known high value north central Gulf of Mexico benthic habitats and cultural resources	Coral reef/coral community; mesophotic coral habitats; deep coral ecosystems; shipwrecks	NW banks; Pinnacles; continental slope	935.18

In 2007, the Sanctuary Advisory Council submitted a proposal to expand the boundaries of Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary. The advisory council is comprised of representatives of user groups associated with the sanctuary. The proposed expansion includes five potential alternatives.

**Alternative 3 is NOAA's preferred alternative.**

development of high-resolution multibeam bathymetric maps of the region has revealed important and vulnerable geological and biological features outside of the sanctuary's current boundaries, including networks of geological features connecting the more prominent reefs and banks in this area much more directly than previously understood.

In addition, numerous underwater surveys conducted by the sanctuary and its scientific partners confirm that populations of living marine resources across the region are connected. Fish occupy and likely move from bank to bank along the ridges and outcrops between them and coral larvae are distributed among them by regional current patterns. These "habitat highways" are critical to the ecological

integrity of the reefs and banks of the north central Gulf of Mexico, including Flower Garden Banks.

Also, many banks and associated topographic features in this area, like Flower Garden Banks, have unique or unusual structural features, and may be highly vulnerable to certain human impacts that alter the physical, chemical, biological, or acoustic environment.

### The Proposal

The proposed expansion includes five potential alternatives. NOAA's preferred alternative would add 15 additional banks to the current sanctuary, ranging from 70 to 120 miles off-shore and comprised of nearly 383 square miles of coral reefs and bottom features harboring a

diverse range of marine species.

NOAA proposes extending existing protections of Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary to these additional areas to limit the impact of bottom-disturbing activities related to oil and gas exploration and production; fishing with bottom-tending gear; ship anchoring, and salvage activities on sensitive biological and geological resources. Sanctuary expansion would also provide a management framework to protect and conserve sanctuary resources and to allow uses that are compatible with resource protection.

### To learn more about the expansion proposal, contact:

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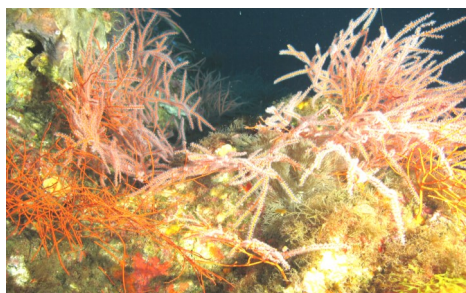


Photo: NOAA, UNCW-UVP

Dense fields of gorgonian coral grow atop the basalt spires at Alderdice Bank.



Photo: NOAA, UNCW-UVP

Almaco jacks are one of the fish species that inhabit the proposed expansion area.



Photo: NOAA, UNCW-UVP

Colorful sponges and bright green algae adorn the cap of Bright Bank.