

Summary
Reef Fish Advisory Panel
Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
Tampa, FL
Wednesday, October 2, 2019
8:30 a.m. – 5:30 p.m.

Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Expansion: Sanctuary Plan and Comments

Mr. Stephen Werndli, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS) staff, presented an overview of the proposed expansion of the sanctuary boundary. The draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) was released on August 2019 with a public comment period ending on January 31, 2020. The goal of this expansion is to protect not just coral cover, which has continued to decline, but other habitats important for restoration, foraging, and fish-spawning areas. The Council will have an opportunity to comment at its October 2019 meeting.

The preferred alternative proposes to expand the sanctuary boundary: southward to align with zones designated as “area to be avoided”, which prevents navigation of large vessels within those areas; and a westward expansion that would include the waters surrounding the Tortugas Ecological Reserves North and South. Mr. Werndli noted this will protect the ecological connectivity between those areas adjacent to the current sanctuary boundary.

The AP requested clarification on the designation of “no motor” as a measure to protect seagrasses in shallow waters. The AP recommended the installation of channel markers that would guide navigation as an alternative to designating a large area as “no motor” or “no entry”. The AP noted alternatives like these might be better received by user-groups as it might be a more controlled way to manage an area while still allowing recreational use. Mr. Werndli stated that one of the alternatives proposed the use of navigational aids or signs that would specify depth and allowable draft for navigating vessels. The AP also expressed concern about the fishing restrictions proposed for the Tortugas Corridor. Mr. Werndli explained that the proposed corridor is an important area for fish spawning aggregations.

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Expansion Update

Mr. Schmahl gave an update on the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary (FGBNMS) expansion. The primary objective of this proposal is to protect bottom communities from physical disturbance related to oil and gas development, anchor damage, shipping vessels, and inappropriate fishing activities. A Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) was released in June 2016, with preferred Alternative 3 which included 15 additional reefs and banks and would increase the sanctuary area to 383 square miles. After receiving public input, the FGBNMS Advisory Council (SAC) recommended reducing the proposed expansion area by drawing boundaries to more closely coincide with previously identified protective areas (BOEM

No Activity Zones) in order to reduce the impact to historical users of this area; this reduced the footprint from 383 square miles to approximately 160 square miles in size. A proposed rule that will establish the expanded boundaries is expected to be announced in the upcoming months, and this process will also include a public comment period.

The AP requested more information on the types of fishing methods allowed in the sanctuary boundaries. Mr. Schmahl responded that any kind of gear that directly affect bottom structures would be prohibited, such as a bottom longline gear. Hook and line fishing as well as bandit rigs are allowed as long as the vessel is not anchored. The AP commended the FGBNMS effort to address stakeholders' input throughout the development of this proposal.