

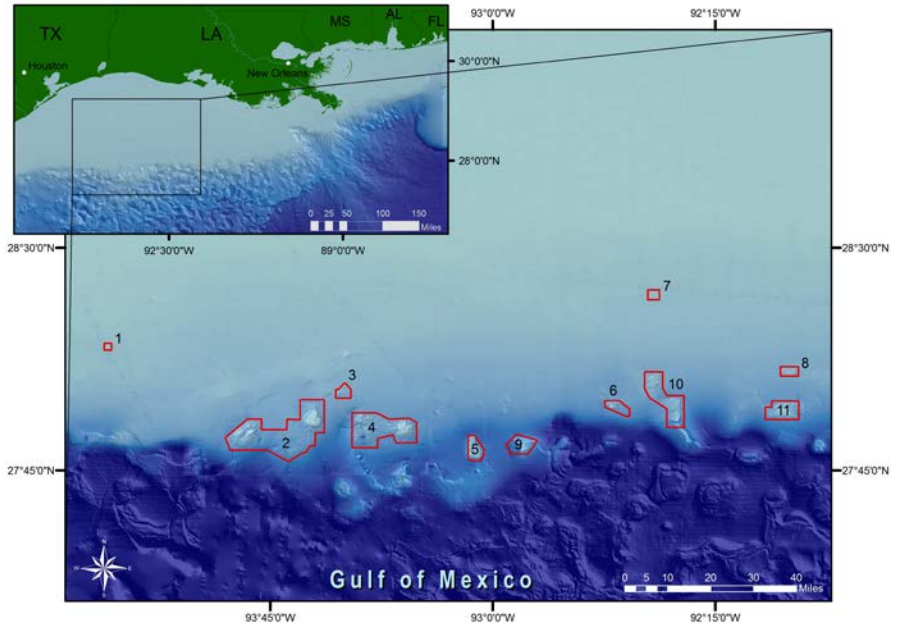
Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Boundary Expansion: DEIS Alternative Summary

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration led the development of this Draft Environmental Impact Statement, with cooperating agency support from the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) and Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE). The proposed action evaluated in this DEIS is to expand, as appropriate, the network of protected areas within the sanctuary (i.e., those areas in which existing sanctuary regulations and management actions would apply). The proposed action advances NOAA's mission to conserve and manage coastal and marine ecosystems and resources and furthers the FGBNMS mission to identify, protect, conserve, and enhance the natural and cultural resources, values, and qualities of FGBNMS and its regional environment for this and future generations. The need for the proposed action is informed by widespread acute and chronic threats to marine habitat in the north central Gulf of Mexico that can most effectively be addressed through NOAA's evaluation and implementation of the comprehensive suite of habitat conservation and management actions made possible by FGBNMS expansion to ensure that valuable natural resources are available to future generations of Americans.

On February 3, 2015, NOAA published a notice of intent (NOI) in the Federal Register (80 FR 5699), which notified the public of the proposed action, announced the three public scoping meetings, and solicited public comments about the proposal to expand the sanctuary boundaries. ONMS held public scoping meetings in New Orleans, LA on March 3, 2015, Houston, TX on March 5, 2015 and Galveston, TX on March 11, 2015. During the comment period, the agency received approximately 200 comments from or on behalf of both organizations and individuals. The comments were generally supportive of the concept, with some comments conveying conditional support.



NOAA evaluated a range of alternatives to achieve the proposed action. These alternatives are summarized in Table 1, below. Expanding the FGBNMS boundaries under NOAA’s preferred alternative would modify the existing Stetson Bank boundary and would incorporate East and West Flower Garden Banks in a single new habitat complex area inclusive of Horseshoe Bank. The preferred alternative would also establish seven new discontinuous boundaries encompassing seven individual banks (McGrail, Geyer, Sonnier, Alderdice, MacNeil, Elvers, and Parker) and two additional habitat complexes inclusive of multiple reefs and banks (the Bright-Rankin-28 Fathom complex and the Bouma-Bryant-Rezak-Sidner complex). NOAA’s preferred alternative would result in a ~383-square-mile sanctuary (including the existing sanctuary) encompassing 18 nationally significant reef and bank features NOAA based this alternative on criteria developed by the FGBNMS Sanctuary Advisory Council’s Boundary Expansion Working Group, the Advisory Council’s 2007 recommendation for boundary expansion, research and consultation with other federal and state agencies by sanctuary staff, and strong public support and comment during public meetings preceding this proposal.



The range of alternatives took into consideration extensive research and characterization that have taken place since the 2007 recommendation made by the Sanctuary Advisory Council, and also the impacts and restoration plans resulting from the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster. Alternatives 4 and 5 would require additional capacity and funding.

Table 1. Summary of expansion alternatives evaluated in this DEIS

| | Resources Present | Subregions of the North Central Gulf of Mexico | Total Area (sq. mi.) |
|--|--|--|----------------------|
| Alternative 1: No Action, retain current boundary | Coral reef/coral community; mesophotic coral habitats | NW banks | 56.21 |
| Alternative 2: 2007 Sanctuary Advisory Council recommendation | Coral reef/coral community; mesophotic coral habitats | NW banks, continental slope | 281.15 |
| Alternative 3: 2015 FGBNMS staff recommendation, NOAA’s preferred alternative | Coral reef/coral community; mesophotic coral habitats | NW banks, continental slope | 383.19 |
| Alternative 4: NOAA’s preferred alternative 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 |
| Alternative 5: 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 |

Analysis of Environmental Consequences:

Alternative 1, the “No Action” alternative, would not fulfill the purpose or need for the proposed action described above. Alternatives 2 and 3 would limit the area of expansion to fit within the sanctuary’s current operational range and capacity (i.e., using existing staff, facilities, and vessels to conduct management activities), and Alternative 3 would provide the greatest environmental benefit within that range and capacity. Additional resources beyond the current capacity of the FGBNMS would be required to support the more comprehensive Alternatives 4 and 5 described in this DEIS.

NOAA evaluated the environmental impacts of the proposed action on a range of resource categories in this DEIS, including the physical environment (air quality and climate, the noise environment, scenic and visual resources, geology and substrates, and water), the biological environment (living marine resources and protected species), cultural and historic resources, and marine area use, recreation, and socioeconomics (including commercial and recreational fishing, recreational scuba diving, oil and gas exploration and production, shipping, and passive economic use).

No significant adverse impacts to resources and the human environment are expected under any alternative evaluated to accomplish the proposed action either individually or cumulatively when added to other past, present and reasonably foreseeable future actions. The boundaries proposed under each of the expansion alternatives encompass progressively greater numbers of nationally significant biological and geological features and progressively greater areal extent. Environmental consequences are proportional to the number of features and areal extent encompassed under each alternative. As such, Alternative 5 represents the environmentally preferable alternative under this analysis. However, NOAA has identified Alternative 3 as the agency’s preferred alternative (i.e., the alternative that the agency believes would fulfill its statutory mission and responsibilities, giving consideration to economic, environmental, technical and other factors). Alternative 3 provides the greatest environmental benefit that can be managed with current FGBNMS operational capacity and budgetary resources (i.e., using existing staff, facilities, and vessels to conduct management activities in a funding-neutral, or only slightly funding positive, scenario). Long-term beneficial impacts are anticipated if the proposed action is implemented.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

NOAA accepted public comments from June 2016 to August 2016 through Regulations.gov, mail, and in person during public hearings held in Galveston, TX, Houston, TX, New Orleans, LA, Lafayette, LA and Mobile, AL.

- A total of 8,491 comments were received during this period. Of those, 6,301 (74%) expressed support for expansion and 2,129 (25%) expressed opposition.
- Of the 6,301 comments in support of expansion, 4,579 expressed support for Alternative 5 (the most comprehensive alternative), 1,501 for Alternative 3 (Preferred Alternative) and only 9 for Alternative 2 (the 2007 SAC Alternative).
- Of the 6,301 comments in support of expansion, 5,953 were part of a petition and/or letter writing campaigns (Sierra Club, Gulf Restoration Network, Sea Turtle conservation group). Of the 2,129 comments in opposition, 2,023 were part of letter writing campaigns (American Petroleum Institute, Consumer Energy Alliance).
- Of the 421 comments received that were not part of organized petition or letter writing campaigns, 358 (85%) expressed support and 23 were opposed.
- Support letters were received from the following non-government organizations: Sierra Club, Gulf Restoration Network, The Ocean Foundation, National Wildlife Federation, Texas Conservation Alliance, Marine Conservation Institute, Center for Biological Diversity, The Ocean Conservancy, and The Nature Conservancy.
- Opposition to the proposal expressed through a letter from a consortium of industry groups, including API, NOIA (National Ocean Industries Association), IPAA (Independent Petroleum Association of America),

IADC (International Association of Drilling Contractors), IAGC (International Association of Geophysical Contractors) and OOC (Offshore Operators Committee). Additional opposition letters were received from the Consumer Energy Alliance, and the following oil and gas companies: Fieldwood Energy, Noble Energy, W&T Offshore, Shell Exploration and Production and Gulslope Energy.

- Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders Alliance expressed conditional support of the expansion, and supported the recommendation of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (GMFMC).

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: George.Schmahl@noaa.gov, Sanctuary Superintendent, Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary at 409-621-5151 ext. 102.

Copies of the draft environmental impact statement can be downloaded or viewed on the internet at <http://flowergarden.noaa.gov/management/expansiondeis.html>.

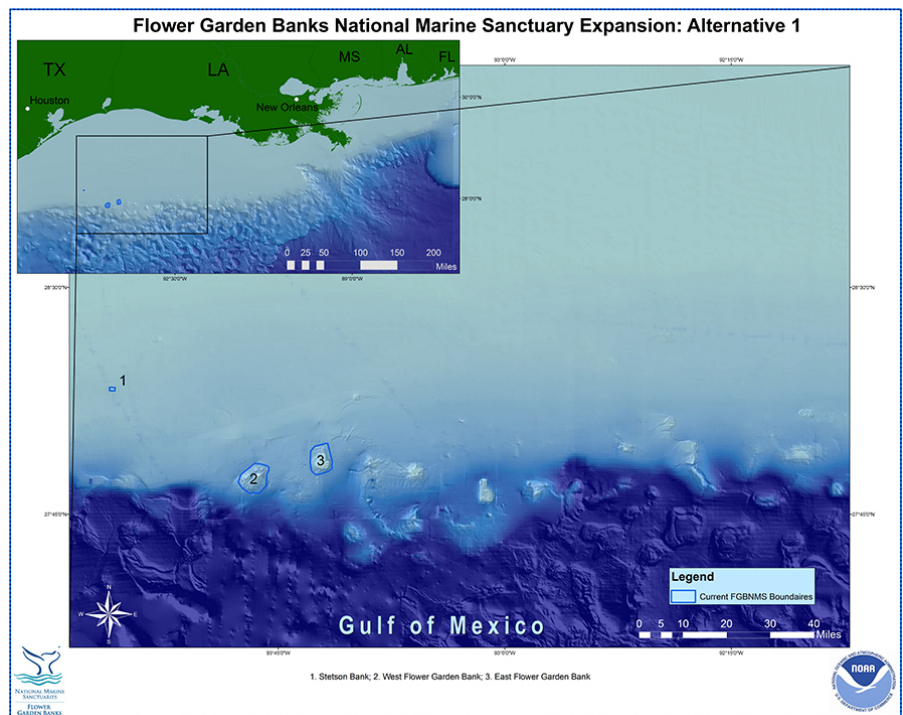
RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES (options presented are cumulative in nature).

Boundaries were developed based on best available bathymetric and bottom type data, *in situ* coral observations, and input from user groups and the research community. Biologically sensitive areas were delineated using bathymetry to identify high local relief, backscatter or seismic reflectivity to identify hard bottom habitat, and buffer zones around high-density coral observations. The buffer zones were a compromise acknowledging the need for access to subsurface resources by the oil and gas industry.

ALTERNATIVE 1

No Action

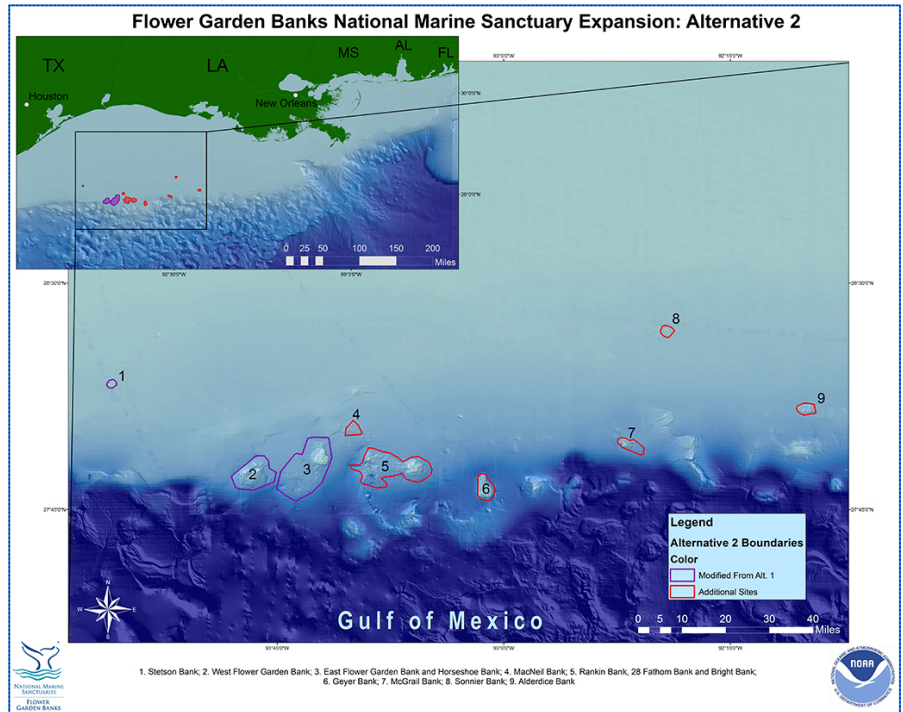
Current sanctuary: 3 banks, 3 polygons
Current sanctuary area: 56.21 sq miles



ALTERNATIVE 2

- FGBNMS Sanctuary Advisory Council Recommendation (proposed in 2007, published in 2012 Management Plan)
- Adjust current sanctuary boundaries to better encompass hard bottom habitat.
- 9 additional banks in 6 additional polygons compared with current sanctuary
- Including current sanctuary locations, total of 12 banks, in 9 polygons (2 multi-bank complexes)

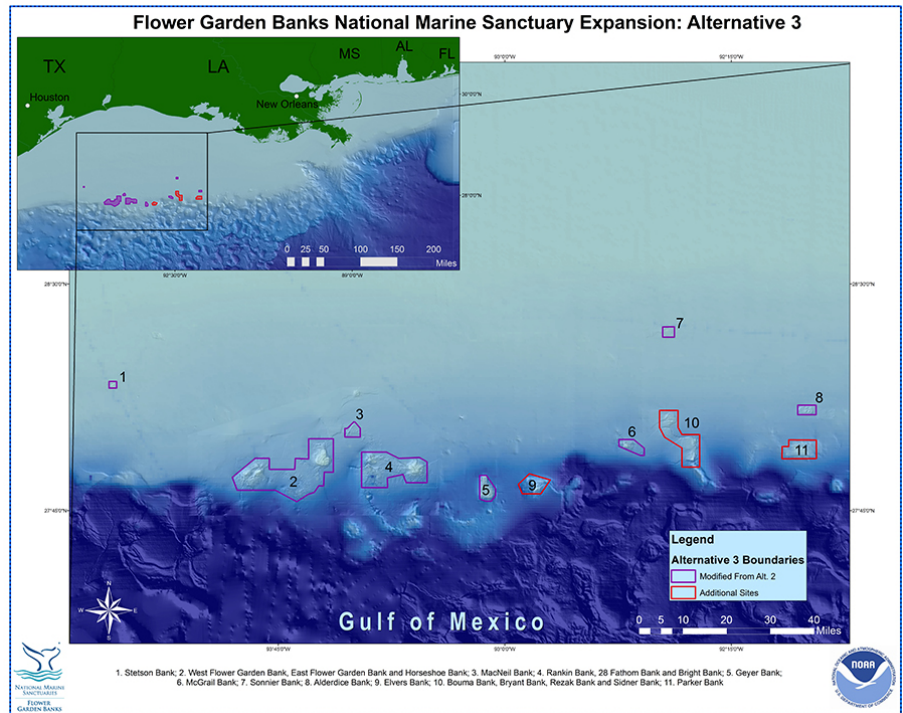
Current Sanctuary area: 56.21 sq miles
 Net Increase Over Current Sanctuary: 224.94 sq miles
 Alternative 2 Area: 281.15 sq miles



ALTERNATIVE 3
2015 Staff Recommendation
(PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE)

- 15 additional banks in 8 additional polygons compared to current sanctuary
- Including current sanctuary locations, a total of 18 banks, in 11 polygons (3 multi-bank complexes).

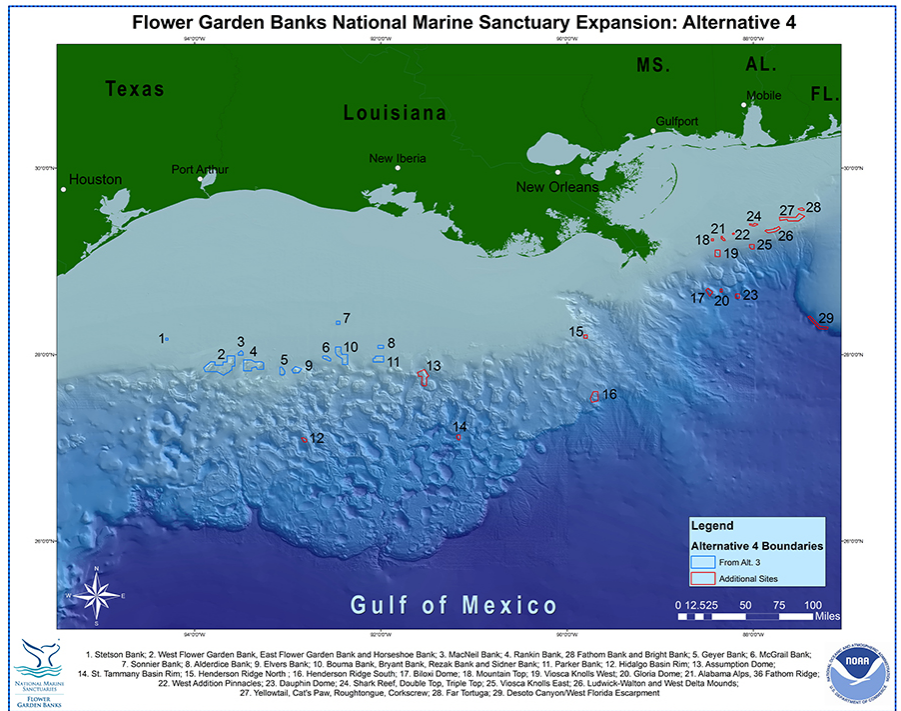
Current Sanctuary area: 56.21 sq miles
 Net Increase Over Current Sanctuary: 326.98 sq miles
 Alternative 3 Area: 383.19 sq miles



ALTERNATIVE 4

- High Priority Mesophotic and Deep Coral Sites
- 40 additional banks in 26 additional polygons compared to current sanctuary, for a total of 43 banks in 29 polygons (8 multi-bank complexes).

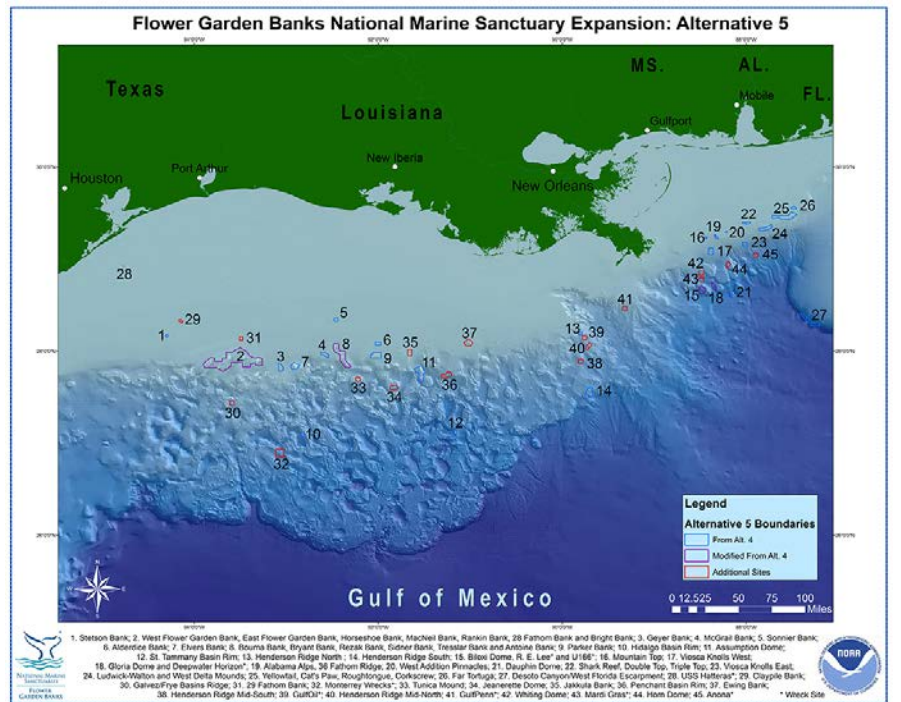
Current Sanctuary area: 56.21 sq miles
 Net Increase Over Current Sanctuary: 577.55 sq miles
 Alternative 4 Area: 633.76 sq miles



ALTERNATIVE 5

- High Value Habitats and Cultural Resources
- 54 additional banks, 9 historic shipwrecks, and the DWH site, in 42 additional polygons compared to the current sanctuary, for a total of 57 banks, 9 historic shipwrecks, and the DWH site, in 45 polygons (10 multi-bank, bank/wreck, or multi-wreck complexes)

Current Sanctuary area: 56.21 sq miles
 Net Increase Over Current Sanctuary: 878.97 sq miles
 Alternative 5 Area: 935.18 sq miles



JUNE 2016