

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Notice of Proposed Rulemaking for Sanctuary Expansion

MAY 2020

PUBLIC COMMENT

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

Comments on any aspect of the proposed rule, and specifically boundaries, spearfishing, and pelagic longlining, may be submitted via www.regulations.gov using docket number NOAA-NOS-2019-0033.

ENDS JULY 3, 2020

NEXT STEPS

PUBLIC MEETINGS

NOAA will hold three virtual public meetings online on June 8 and June 11, 2020. See the website listed at the bottom of this page for meeting times and registration information.

FINAL DECISION

NOAA will consider the comments it receives on the proposed rule for expansion before making a final decision.

This will lead to a Final Environmental Impact Statement and a Final Rule, which is the end of the expansion process.

Background

Building on more than 30 years of scientific studies and public review, NOAA is issuing a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking to expand Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary from 56 square miles to 160 square miles to protect additional critical Gulf of Mexico habitat.

In 1992, NOAA designated 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. Located 70 to 115 miles off the coasts of Texas and Louisiana, the existing sanctuary includes the northernmost coral reefs in the continental United States, deepwater reef communities, and other essential habitats for a variety of marine species.

The proposed rule would add 14 additional reefs and banks to the sanctuary that provide important habitat for recreationally and commercially important fish, as well as threatened or endangered species of manta rays, sea turtles, and corals.

The proposed rule for expansion would extend existing sanctuary protections to these new areas to limit the destructive impact of activities related to fishing with bottom-tending gear, ship anchoring, oil and gas exploration and production, and salvage activities on sensitive

biological resources.

NOAA is inviting the public to provide input on any aspect of the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking during a public comment period ending on June 23, 2020. The agency is also requesting specific input on changes to the proposed boundaries, as well as the NOAA Fisheries and Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council requests for spearfishing and pelagic longlining exemptions within the expansion areas.

What has changed since the 2016 DEIS?

On June 10, 2016, NOAA released a draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) including a set of alternatives that would implement potential changes to the sanctuary. The preferred alternative from the DEIS would have added 15 banks to the sanctuary (for a total of 18 banks) and resulted in an increase of the existing sanctuary area from approximately 56 square miles to approximately 383 square miles.

After a lengthy process and significant input from primary constituents, the Sanctuary Advisory Council developed a revised recommendation. This, along with public comments and interagency consultations, resulted in what is now NOAA's revised preferred alternative for sanctuary expansion. The Notice of Proposed Rulemaking is

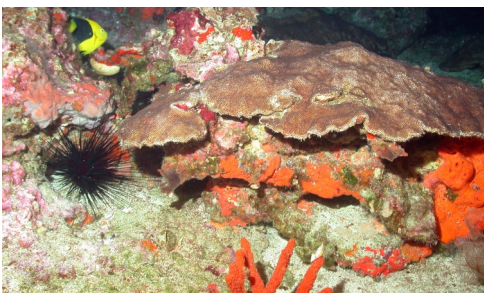


Photo: NOAA, UNCW-UVP

Blushing star coral and colorful sponges are a feature of shallow areas at McGrail Bank.



Photo: NOAA, UNCW-UVP

A large black coral (white organism) provides habitat for other animals at Horseshoe Bank.



Photo: NOAA, UNCW-UVP

A grouper eyes a school of fish swimming above colorful sponges and algae at Sidner Bank.

based upon this revised preferred alternative and will add 14 banks (for a total of 17 banks) and increase the sanctuary size from 56 to approximately 160 square miles.

NOAA has reduced the size of the expansion areas proposed in the 2016 DEIS preferred alternative to minimize user conflicts and potential economic impacts to the offshore energy industry. NOAA also prepared a supplemental information report, which evaluated changes to the 2016 preferred alternative and determined that the revised preferred alternative does not present substantial changes in the proposed action. Therefore, preparing a supplemental EIS to the 2016 DEIS is not necessary.

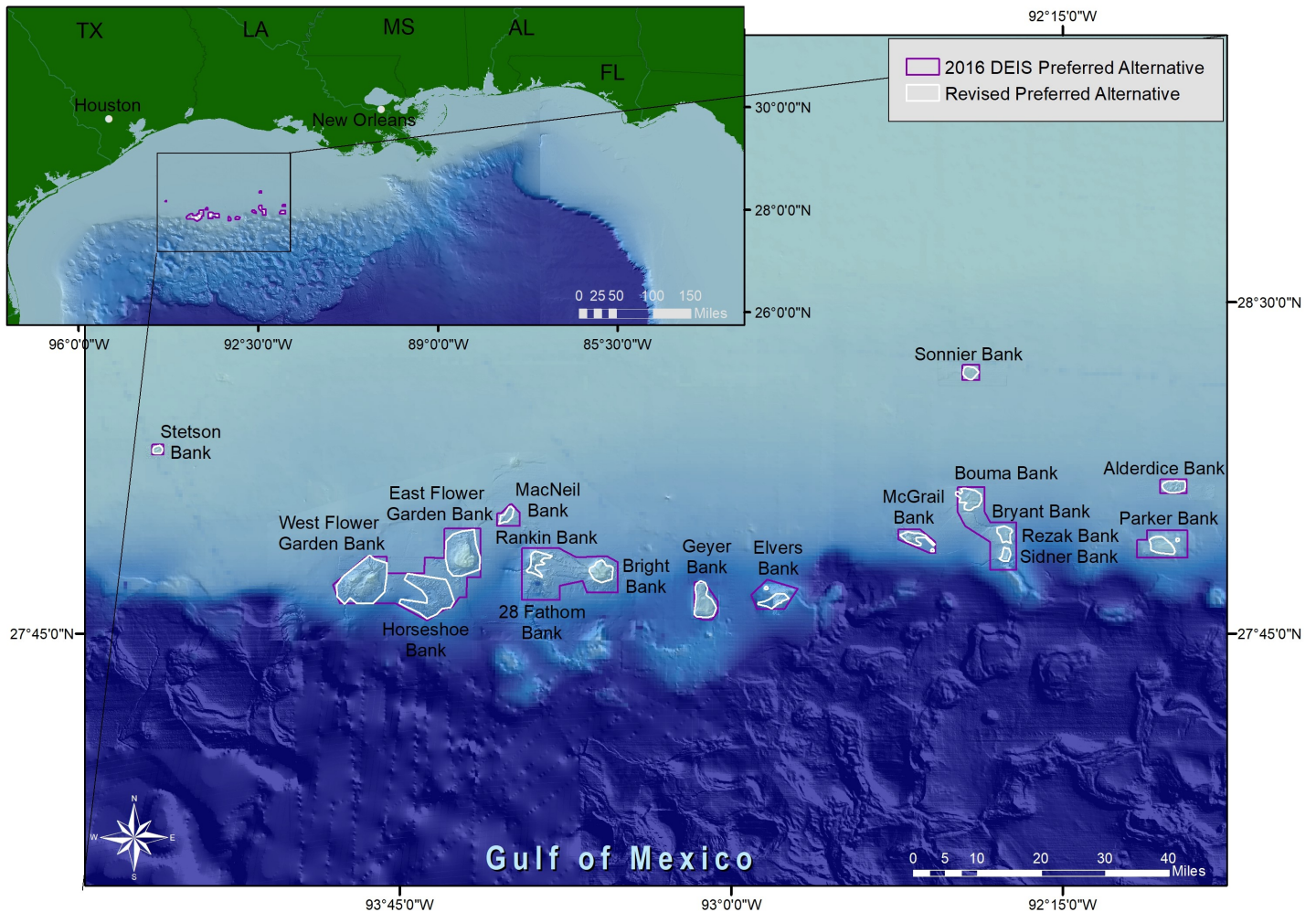
To learn more about the expansion proposal, visit:
<https://flowergarden.noaa.gov/management/expansionnpr.html>

Or contact:
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Photo: NOAA, UNCW-UVP

Gray and vermilion snapper swim past a field of gorgonians at Alderdice Bank.



Map: NOAA

NOAA's revised preferred alternative for expanding Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary would add 14 additional banks to the sanctuary. Purple lines indicate the 2016 DEIS preferred alternative; white lines indicate the 2020 revised preferred alternative.

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