

Management Plan Review

What is a sanctuary management plan and why is it being updated?

A sanctuary management plan is a site-specific planning and management document that describes the objectives, policies, and activities for a sanctuary. Management plans generally outline regulatory goals, describe boundaries, identify staffing and budget needs and set priorities and performance measures for resource protection, research and education programs. They also guide the development of future management activities.

The National Marine Sanctuary Program (NMSP) is required by law to periodically review sanctuary management plans to ensure that sanctuary sites continue to best conserve, protect and enhance their nationally significant living and cultural resources. Most plans date back to their original designation date and have not been updated. Recent scientific discoveries, advancements in managing marine resources and new resource management issues may not be addressed in existing plans. The management plan for the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary (FGBNMS) dates back to its designation in 1992.

What are the steps for the review?

This process begins with the release of a *State of the Sanctuary* report that provides information about the FGBNMS, its accomplishments and current resource management issues. This report is scheduled for release in October 2006. Following the release of this report, the sanctuary will hold public scoping meetings, develop action plans, and prepare a draft management plan. Formal public hearings on the draft plan will help staff revise the document into a final management plan, which, once approved, will outline the sanctuary's priorities for the next 5-10 years.

Scoping Meetings: FGBNMS staff will hold public scoping meetings in several communities in October 2006. These meetings will allow sanctuary users, members of the public and agencies to comment on the sanctuary management strategies and provide input on what issues and problems they see as management priorities. The dates, times and locations of scoping meetings are available through the sanctuary office.

Action Plans: After the scoping meetings, FGBNMS staff will review all comments and work with the Sanctuary Advisory Council and the public to prioritize issues for the management plan review. If necessary, additional workshops will be scheduled to help sanctuary staff develop tailored action plans that address priority issues. These action plans will form the foundation of the draft management plan.

Draft & Final Management Plans: The draft management plan will contain a series of action plans that address resource protection and general management. They may also propose regulatory changes. Once again, the public will have an opportunity to comment. A supporting environmental document, such as an Environmental Assessment or an Environmental Impact Statement, will be prepared to support and explain any changes. After the close of the public comment period, the NMSP will review comments and make any necessary changes before issuing the final management plan.

What kind of changes can I expect?

Management plan review provides an opportunity for sanctuary staff and the public to shape the future direction and management of each sanctuary. At this time, it is too early to determine the specific issues or changes that may be addressed for the FGBNMS. This will, in part, depend on program priorities and comments received throughout scoping. However, during the management plan review, the sanctuary will evaluate and possibly revise their operation and management framework; resource protection, education, and research programs; site-specific regulations; boundaries; and management zones.

Why is the public involved?

Active and informed public participation is a key element of sanctuary management, particularly during management plan review. The NMSP recognizes the public as a key resource management partner and values their input in helping shape and manage marine sanctuaries. For almost 30 years, the NMSP has engaged the public in helping create new sanctuaries, develop resource protection strategies, resolve multi-stakeholder issues (i.e., water quality, vessel traffic, and marine reserves) and review existing management plans. Using the lessons learned from these experiences, the NMSP will help build community awareness of key issues affecting the FGBNMS and actively engage user and interest groups, agencies and the public in an open dialogue about how to best shape the future direction and management of the FGBNMS.

How can I be involved?

The public will have numerous opportunities to participate in management plan review, beginning with the scoping meetings and continuing through the development of the draft and final management plans. The FGBNMS will provide ample notice of each meeting through local media and the website.

You can become involved in the management plan review by first helping identify issues and potential solutions during the scoping phase. The FGBNMS will accept comments in writing, via the Internet, or in person at any of the scoping workshops. After the issues have been reviewed and prioritized, the sanctuary will involve the public in developing action plans. These action plans will become the foundation for the draft management plan, which, once completed, will be available for public review and comment. Throughout the review process, you may also attend any of the Sanctuary Advisory Council meetings. Meeting agendas and meeting minutes will be posted on the sanctuary website, and all meetings are open to the public.

Where can I get more information?

For more information, print copies of specific documents or to be added to the distribution list for management plan review updates and announcements, please contact the sanctuary office.

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Or, visit <http://flowergarden.noaa.gov> and click on the Management Plan Review link.

What is the National Marine Sanctuary Program?

The nation's National Marine Sanctuary Program (NMSP), established in 1972 by the National Marine Sanctuaries Act, is administered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and protects a system of 14 special marine and freshwater areas. The goal of the National Marine Sanctuaries Act is to set aside and manage areas for resource protection, research, enhanced public education, and compatible and public and private uses. Today, our marine sanctuary system contains whale migration corridors, deep sea canyons, kelp forests, coral reefs and underwater archeological sites. In the northwestern Gulf of Mexico, the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary has been established to protect and conserve the marine ecosystem.

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, located about 110 miles south of the Texas/Louisiana border, boasts the northernmost coral reefs in the continental United States. The sanctuary actually protects three separate areas: East Flower Garden Bank, West Flower Garden Bank and Stetson Bank. These banks are separated from each other by miles of open ocean ranging from 200 to 400 feet (61-122 meters) deep, and each bank has its own set of boundaries. Continued interest in the biological diversity and breathtaking beauty of the reefs at East and West Flower Garden Banks led to their designation as a sanctuary in 1992. The coral-sponge communities of Stetson Bank were added to the sanctuary in 1996.

For more information, visit the Management Plan Review link on the sanctuary website:

<http://flowergarden.noaa.gov>



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