

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

A Proposal to Expand the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary

An interview with Sanctuary Superintendent, G.P. Schmahl

(Opening scene of Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Headquarters sign, followed by video of a whale shark swimming in the sanctuary with the video title superimposed.)

0:12 *(G.P. Schmahl standing next to map poster on an easel to his left)*

Hello, my name is G.P. Schmahl. I'm with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration or NOAA and I'm the superintendent of the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary.

The Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary is a marine protected area, something very similar to a national park, except out in the water. Most people aren't aware that a lot of these areas even exist, but the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary protects *(Video of coral spawning)* an incredibly healthy and incredibly important coral reef ecosystem located about 100 miles offshore of the coast of Texas and Louisiana. *(Map showing location of sanctuary in the Gulf of Mexico)* It's about 56 square miles in size and it protects 3 individual bank features: the East Flower Garden Bank, West Flower Garden Bank, and another feature called Stetson Bank.

1:00 *(G.P. Schmahl standing next to map poster on an easel to his left)*

All of these areas were recognized early on as being very important, *(Video of golden smooth trunkfish and a school of cottonwicks swimming in the sanctuary)* providing critical habitat for a variety of biological communities and fish species of recreational and commercial importance. And, in 1992, it was designated as a national marine sanctuary. *(Map of the National Marine Sanctuary System)* It's one of a system of 14 national marine sanctuaries and marine national monuments that are in the waters of the United States.

1:30 *(G.P. Schmahl standing next to map poster on an easel to his left)*

We have just recently proposed an expansion of the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, and we feel it's important and justified because even though these areas have been protected for quite a while now, *(Map showing reefs and banks of northern Gulf of Mexico)* they are only 3 of dozens of reefs, banks and other features in the northern Gulf of Mexico. Over the last 30 years or so there's been quite a bit of research, exploration, discovery and characterization of many of these features that have reinforced the importance of them and also suggested that they are in need of additional protection and management.

2:12 *(G.P. Schmahl standing next to map poster on an easel to his left)*

I often get the question of "What exactly is a national marine sanctuary?" Many people, because of the name sanctuary, it sort of implies that no activities at all can happen within those areas. Even though that is maybe what the common use of the word "sanctuary" is, a national marine sanctuary actually is

set up to allow for a variety of uses and activities that can occur as long as they are compatible with primary objective of protecting the resources that are out there.

2:49 (G.P. Schmahl standing next to map poster on an easel to his left)

So, for example, at the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary one of the primary concerns was the impact of anchoring. (Video of a large ship anchored near shore) So, anchoring is prohibited within the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary. (Image showing anchor damage to the sea floor/reef from a large ship anchor) And, that's for obvious reasons. The sensitive coral communities are very subject to injury from dropping anchors. But, what the sanctuary does, in the case of the Flower Garden Banks, is to provide for mooring buoys. (Slide listing of Regulated Activities in the sanctuary) We've installed a number of mooring buoys out at the coral reef at the Flower Gardens to allow people to access the area, to moor up to these buoys, so that they don't have to drop their anchor in order to access the area.

They go out there commonly to scuba dive. (Video of spotted eagle ray swimming above the reef in the sanctuary) It is becoming a very popular scuba diving destination because it's an area where you can not only see healthy corals, but you can have a good chance of seeing some large animals like manta rays, whale sharks, (Video of hammerhead shark in sanctuary) and several species of sea turtles. Scuba diving is fine, but taking things, again, is not, so you can take pictures, (Video of spotted eagle ray swimming in sanctuary) but you are prohibited from taking any kind of animals of any sort, shells, invertebrates, corals, anything like that.

4:09 (G.P. Schmahl standing next to map poster on an easel to his left)

People are sometimes surprised to learn that we allow fishing within the national marine sanctuary, at the Flower Garden Banks, but by hook and line fishing only. Certain types of fishing gear can cause significant injury, again, to the coral reefs and sensitive biological communities: (Image of fishing nets and lines at Stetson, Alderdice, Parker, and Horseshoe Banks) things such as trawling or putting traps or bottom long-lines. Those types of fishing activities are prohibited within the sanctuary, and spearfishing is prohibited as well. But, hook and line fishing, both commercial and recreational, is allowed in the sanctuary.

4:48 (G.P. Schmahl standing next to map poster on an easel to his left)

We even allow for certain other types of more industrial activity. As you know, this part of the Gulf of Mexico is one of the most heavily developed areas for offshore oil and gas exploration, development and production in the world. We have set up our regulations such that even certain oil and gas activities can occur inside the national marine sanctuary, again, as long as it's set back away from the sensitive communities and as long as other types of their activities, such as discharge, are restricted or modified.

5:31 (G.P. Schmahl standing next to map poster on an easel to his left)

So, the sanctuary provides a level of protection, but it does not prohibit all uses, and, in fact, we encourage and want people to see and enjoy the resources that are out there and why these areas were designated as national marine sanctuaries to begin with.

5:50 *(G.P. Schmahl standing next to map poster on an easel to his left)*

In June of this year, 2016, NOAA put forward *(Image of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement cover, date of release June 10, 2016, public comment period June 10-August 19)* a proposal to expand the sanctuary, released a Draft Environmental Impact Statement, and we have suggested a range of 5 alternatives that should be considered in this expansion, and we have selected one of those alternatives as what we refer to as our Preferred Alternative.

6:14 *(Close up view of map poster showing specifics of Alternative 1)*

Here we have a map of the northern Gulf of Mexico. You can see here in this inset, the area of Texas, Louisiana. Houston is located here--New Orleans over here. Galveston, TX, where our offices are, is located just about here. If you travel directly south of the state line between Texas and Louisiana, 100 miles offshore, you will eventually intersect the two areas that are known as the Flower Garden Banks. They are shown here in yellow, and the smaller area, up to the left, known as Stetson Bank.

6:56 *(Close up view of map poster showing specifics of Alternative 1)*

In our range of alternatives for expansion we have included, essentially, a no-action alternative, which means that we would not expand. We would just contain the same areas that are already existing in the national marine sanctuary. The lighter blue color is relatively shallow as you move from the coastline of Texas and Louisiana; it drops gradually off, to an area about 100 miles offshore. Then it starts to drop very quickly into the deeper waters of the Gulf of Mexico. So that's essentially our first alternative, to keep things as they are.

7:35 *(Close up view of map poster showing specifics of Alternative 2)*

Our second alternative would add 9 additional reefs and banks in the vicinity of the Flower Garden Banks. Again, for orientation, these two areas here are the existing East and West Flower Garden Bank. You'll notice that the East Flower Garden Bank, here, has been enlarged quite a lot in this alternative because of a very unique reef feature that occurs to the west of this particular feature. It would also include 8 additional banks going to the east. And they vary slightly, in the way they have developed, and the types of biological communities that exist there, but in lots of ways they are very similar too. These are coral communities, but they are different than the types of shallow water coral reefs that people might be familiar with in the Florida Keys, or in shallow areas of the Caribbean. But they are no less important than these shallow areas, but they have different types of coral communities that exist there.

8:51 *(Close up view of map poster showing specifics of Alternative 3)*

We took that suggestion and built on it to come up with Alternative 3, which we actually have identified as our Preferred Alternative. You can see here that in addition to the 9 banks that were identified in

Alternative 2, there are 6 additional features that also have been added for this alternative. This, we believe, would provide a level of protection throughout this range, along the edge of the continental shelf in this part of the Gulf of Mexico, that would protect these areas for generations to come from a variety of potential impacts, mostly related to activities that may disturb the sea floor.

9:39 *(GP Schmahl standing next to easel with map poster showing specifics of Alternative 3 to his left)*

Anchoring is one of those major impacts. As you can imagine, there is a lot of vessel traffic in this region: huge ships that are passing back and forth every day going in and out of the Port of Houston, the Port of New Orleans, and other areas in the Gulf of Mexico and throughout the gulf region. Some of those ships have been known to come into these shallower areas and drop their anchors, for whatever reason, and as you can imagine, if this is a 900- or 1000-foot freighter, dropping an anchor can have devastating impacts on a sensitive coral community that exists here.

10:27 *(GP Schmahl standing next to easel with map poster showing specifics of Alternative 3 to his left)*

So, this is the one that NOAA has proposed as its Preferred Alternative.

10:35 *(Close up view of map poster showing specifics of Alternative 4)*

For the fourth alternative, we stepped back a bit and took a broader view of the geographic area of the northern Gulf of Mexico, and included not just the area off of Texas and Louisiana that we have been looking at in Alternatives 1-3, but look at an area that goes all the way over to the areas off of Mississippi and Alabama. This is because this entire region is very similar in the types of biological communities that exist there. We term them as it's in the same "bio-region" within all this area, so the communities that exist there are very similar.

11:13 *(GP Schmahl standing next to easel with map poster showing specifics of Alternative 4 to his left)*

These areas off of Mississippi and Alabama are known as the Pinnacles, and they are quite well known to people, and especially fishermen that work off there, because they are very productive marine habitats, and very important, again, as critical habitat for a variety of fish species.

11:34 *(GP Schmahl standing next to easel with map poster showing specifics of Alternative 4 to his left)*

We also include in this alternative some areas that are identified on what's known as the continental slope. This is the area that starts dropping off very quickly into the deep parts of the Gulf of Mexico, and these are very unique areas, as well. These are true deep coral communities, and these corals actually exist in depths where hardly any light at all penetrates. Some of these areas are in essentially totally dark. A lot of people don't realize that there are still quite thriving communities in areas of the ocean that receive no light, but these are also very important and very productive.

12:17 *(Close up view of map poster showing specifics of Alternative 5)*

Our fifth, and final, alternative builds on this Alternative 4, slightly, by adding some additional areas scattered throughout this entire region. There are quite a few more deepwater coral areas that have

been identified for this alternative, as well as some areas in the original area looked at in Alternatives 2 and 3 that were not considered high enough quality to be included in the Preferred Alternative. And this, I might also mention, includes several underwater shipwreck sites that are historically important, such as one that occurs right off of Galveston. *(Image of painting by Tom Freeman showing USS Hatteras and CSS Alabama in a battle at sea)* It's the wreck of the U.S.S. Hatteras, which was sunk during the Civil War during the Battle of Galveston in 1863.

13:15 *(GP Schmahl standing next to easel with map poster showing specifics of Alternative 5 to his left)*

I might also mention that one reason that this area off of Mississippi, Alabama and the eastern part of Louisiana is so important is because this is the area that was directly affected by the oil spill as a result of the Deepwater Horizon/BP oil spill incident. Some of these areas actually were directly impacted by that oil spill, and we believe that by putting them under a protective nature will allow them to recover more quickly and provide a method that we can follow the recovery and do research on the recovery from oil spill impacts.

13:56 *(GP Schmahl standing next to easel with map poster showing specifics of Alternative 5 to his left)*

So, that's the range of alternatives that we have put forward. We are encouraging and soliciting the public to review this proposal and to give us comments and feedback on what you think about it. The public comment period is open through August the 19th, and after that point we will take the information that we've received from the public comment period and come up with a final proposal, that we will hopefully be able to publish within the next 18-24 months.

Closing Credits: Produced by SirPatrickPictures.com, Galveston Videography (14:41)