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Contact: Kelly Drinnen, kelly.drinnen@noaa.gov, 409-621-5151 ext 105
Vernon Smith, vernon.smith@noaa.gov, 301-713-7248

NOAA seeks input on Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary boundaries

NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries is soliciting public and stakeholder comment on a recommendation to modify the current boundaries of the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary in the northern Gulf of Mexico. This is the first step in a process that could expand the sanctuary.

All comments must be submitted to NOAA by close of business on April 6.

Based on several years of scientific assessment and public input, the proposed expansion of the sanctuary emerged as one of the top priority issues during the management plan review process, which was completed in 2012. The sanctuary's advisory council recommended expanding the sanctuary from 56.2 square miles to 280.3 square miles to include up to nine additional reefs and banks, which support essential habitat for commercial and recreational fish species.

"Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary contains some of the most spectacular marine resources in the northern Gulf of Mexico, including some of the healthiest coral reef communities in the entire Caribbean and western Atlantic region," said George P. Schmahl, sanctuary superintendent. "We encourage the public to participate in the comment process so that we can make the best possible decisions regarding the protection of other reefs and banks of regional and national importance."

Located 70 to 115 miles off the coasts of Texas and Louisiana, Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary includes the northernmost coral reefs in the continental United States, deepwater reef communities and other essential habitats for a variety of marine species. NOAA designated the sanctuary in 1992, and Stetson Bank was added to the sanctuary through Congressional action in 1996.

Following this comment period, a draft environmental impact statement will be prepared through a public process under the National Environmental Policy Act. Once it is completed, it will be available for additional public comment before final action is taken.

Three public meetings are planned for the public to learn more about the proposal and submit comments. Meetings are scheduled for:

New Orleans: Tuesday, March 3, 6:00 - 8:00 p.m.
Hilton New Orleans Airport
Cocodrie Room
901 Airline Drive
Kenner, Louisiana 70062
[504-469-5000](tel:5044695000)

Houston: Thursday, March 5, 6:00 - 8:00 p.m.
Bayland Community Center
6400 Bissonnet
Houston, Texas 77074
[713-541-9951](tel:713-541-9951)

Galveston: Wednesday, March 11, 6:00 - 8:00 p.m.
Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Office
NOAA Galveston Laboratory
4700 Avenue U, Building 216
Galveston, Texas 77551
[409-621-5151](tel:409-621-5151)

Comments may also be submitted by any of the following methods:

- Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Submit electronic comments via the Federal eRulemaking Portal with Docket Number NOAA-NOS-2014-0154
- Mail: George Schmahl, Sanctuary Superintendent, Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, 4700 Avenue U, Bldg 216, Galveston TX 77551

For more information on the proposed boundary changes, visit the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary website at <http://flowergarden.noaa.gov/newsevents/fgbexpansionarticle.html> or contact Kelly Drinnen, outreach coordinator at 409-621-5151 ext. 105.

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