

## News Update: Tortugas Planning Process to Wrap Up Public Comments

**New Feature: We've created a new feature to provide updated information on previous articles. Below is an update of the lead story from our first issue ([July 1999, MPA 1:1](#)).**

The period for public comment will end July 31 on a proposal to create a no-take "ecological reserve" in the Tortugas area of the US Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS). That date will mark a milestone in the long process to create a system of no-take areas in FKNMS, an MPA notable for its active commercial and recreational fishing industries. The final plan, incorporating public comments, will be produced later this year.

In a 1995 draft management plan for the sanctuary, FKNMS officials proposed the creation of a 110 sq. nautical mile (346 sq. km) no-take zone for the Tortugas area, to be part of a network of no-take zones in the sanctuary. However, the proposed Tortugas reserve drew criticism that it would cause serious economic harm to fishermen, and FKNMS officials removed it from the final management plan in 1996. Consequently, the sanctuary launched a collaborative initiative with an array of stakeholders to recommend a more acceptable boundary for a Tortugas reserve.

One year ago, the working group responsible for recommending the boundary reached consensus on an ecosystem-based plan for a 635 sq. km reserve, a significant portion of which would be outside of the FKNMS boundary. The working group waited to see how well the consensus would hold as the proposal made its way through the federal designation process. Although a representative of the sportfishing industry had been involved in the working group, another sportsmen's organization that was uninvolved in the planning -- the Wildlife Legislative Fund of America, with reportedly 1.5 million members -- threatened a lawsuit to block any such ban on recreational fishing.

Any lawsuit to block the ban would likely be lodged after action to designate the reserve is taken by the US Department of Commerce, which oversees the National Marine Sanctuary Program. Designation of the reserve is likely to occur in 2001.

The working group's proposal included protection of spawning habitat for snapper and grouper, as well as deepwater habitat for other commercial species. The Tortugas region has the best water quality and healthiest coral in FKNMS.

### Multiple jurisdictions

The working group was responsible for recommending a reserve boundary based on ecosystem considerations, not jurisdictions. As a result, the group recommended protection for an area of reef that fell within the jurisdictions of multiple federal or state agencies, including FKNMS, the Dry Tortugas National Park, the Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Management Council (US), and the state of Florida. The multi-jurisdictional recommendation has had somewhat of a fragmentary effect on agency efforts to adopt the working group's proposal: each agency has been responsible for addressing its portion of the proposed reserve.

The proposal document that is now open for public comment describes FKNMS' recommended alternatives for the boundary and management of its portion of the reserve. The other agencies are adapting the working group proposal to their own jurisdictions.

As described in the proposal document, FKNMS' preferred management alternative for the proposed ecological reserve would include making it a no-take area for all fishing, with no anchoring allowed. Mooring buoys would be available for boats 100 feet (30.5 meters) or shorter. Permission to enter -- such as for diving -- would be required.

Joanne Delaney, research interpreter at FKNMS and the sanctuary's contact person on the Tortugas process, said that support for the process from outside of the Keys has been helpful in moving it along. "It's garnered national and international attention," she said. "There's been support for the collaborative process that we're trying to achieve, as well as support from scientists." Scientists from as far away as the UK addressed the working group.

**For more information:**

Joanne Delaney, Administrative Office, FKNMS, P.O. Box 500368, Marathon, FL 33050, USA. E-mail: joanne.delaney@noaa.gov.

## **Tortugas proposal on the web**

The document that includes FKNMS' proposed boundary and management plan for the Tortugas ecological reserve is available on the web, at [www.fknms.nos.noaa.gov](http://www.fknms.nos.noaa.gov). Directions on how to submit public comments are also available at the site.

---

**Source URL:** <https://www.openchannels.org/news/mpa-news/news-update-tortugas-planning-process-wrap-public-comments>