



## DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

### National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

#### Initiation of Review of Management Plan for Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary; Request for Information

**AGENCY:** Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS), National Ocean Service (NOS),  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Department of Commerce (DOC).

**ACTION:** Initiation of review of management plan; request for information.

**SUMMARY:** The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is initiating a review of  
the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary management plan, to evaluate progress  
toward implementing the goals of the sanctuary and to revise the management plan as necessary  
to fulfill the purposes and policies of the National Marine Sanctuaries Act (NMSA). NOAA is  
requesting information from individuals, companies, organizations, Tribes, and government  
agencies on the scope, types, and significance of issues that NOAA should address in its process  
to revise the management plan. In addition to receiving written comments, NOAA will hold  
public meetings to provide information on the management plan review process and to gather  
oral comments.

**DATES:** All comments should be received on or before 11:59 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time  
(EDT) on [INSERT DATE 45 DAYS FROM PUBLICATION IN THE FEDERAL  
REGISTER].

Comments will also be accepted during public meetings. Public meetings will be held on:

(1) *Date:* April 20, 2026

*Location:* Virtual. Registration is required to attend; to register and for additional meeting  
details, visit: <https://flowergarden.noaa.gov/management/mpr.html>.

*Time:* 6-8 p.m. Central Daylight Time (CDT)

(2) *Date:* May 19, 2026

*Location:* Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, 4700 Avenue U, Building 216, Galveston, Texas 77551. Registration is not required to attend.

*Time:* 2-4 p.m. CDT

(3) *Date:* May 19, 2026

*Location:* Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, 4700 Avenue U, Building 216, Galveston, Texas 77551. Registration is not required to attend.

*Time:* 6-8 p.m. CDT

NOAA may take audio recordings of the public meetings, including the public comment portion of the meetings. NOAA may end a meeting before the time noted above if all those participating have completed their oral comments.

**ADDRESSES:** Comments may be submitted by the following methods:

(1) *Electronic Submission:* Federal eRulemaking Portal

<https://www.regulations.gov/docket/NOAA-NOS-2025-0009>. To submit electronic comments via the Federal eRulemaking Portal, visit <https://www.regulations.gov> and search for Docket Number NOAA-NOS-2025-0009.

(2) *Mail:* Written comments may also be mailed to Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary (Management Plan Review), at 4700 Avenue U, Building 216, Galveston, Texas 77551.

(3) *Public Meetings:* Provide oral comments during public meetings, listed in the **DATES** section above. Registration is not required to attend in-person meetings. Registration is required to attend the virtual meeting. Upon registration, NOAA will send a confirmation email with a link to the virtual meeting. Registration will remain open until the virtual meeting concludes, and any participant in attendance may provide oral comment. Registration details for the virtual meeting and additional information about how to participate in these public meetings are available at <https://flowergarden.noaa.gov/management/mpr.html>

*Instructions:* All comments received are a part of the public record. The entirety of each

comment, including the name of the commenter, email address, attachments, and other supporting materials will be publicly accessible. Do not submit confidential business information or otherwise sensitive or protected information such as account numbers or Social Security numbers. NOAA will accept anonymous comments through [regulations.gov](https://www.regulations.gov) (enter N/A in the required fields to remain anonymous).

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:**

Michelle Johnston, Superintendent, Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, 4700 Avenue U, Building 216, Galveston, Texas 77551, or see:

*<https://flowergarden.noaa.gov/management/mpr.html>.*

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:**

*I. Background*

Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary (sanctuary or FGBNMS) is located 80 to 125 miles off of the coasts of Texas and Louisiana, encompassing approximately 160 square miles of marine ecosystems across 17 separate banks. These banks are made up of a combination of small underwater mountains, ridges, troughs, and hard bottom patches along the continental shelf. Together, they compose a chain of nationally significant habitats for recreationally and economically important species along the continental shelf. The ecosystems of the sanctuary include thriving shallow water coral reefs, algal-sponge communities, and deeper mesophotic reefs of black coral, octocoral, and algal nodule habitats. NOAA first designated the sanctuary in 1992 (56 FR 63634). At that time, the sanctuary consisted of East and West Flower Garden Banks. Stetson Bank was added to the sanctuary in 1996 through an act of Congress (Pub. L. 104–283). In 2021, NOAA expanded the sanctuary to include portions of 14 more banks and applied the existing 2012 management plan to the expansion areas (86 FR 4937). These include Horseshoe, MacNeil, Rankin, 28 Fathom, Bright, Geyer, Elvers, McGrail, Bouma, Sonnier, Rezak, Sidner, Parker, and Alderdice Banks. The sanctuary provides ecosystem services for recreational and commercial uses, including opportunities for scuba diving, fishing, advancing

scientific understanding, and associated education and outreach. NOAA manages FGBNMS as part of the National Marine Sanctuary System under the National Marine Sanctuaries Act of 1972, 16 U.S.C. 1431 *et seq.*, which comprises 18 national marine sanctuaries.

In addition to NOAA, several other Federal agencies share jurisdiction over the FGBNMS area and its resources including: the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, which share primary jurisdiction over offshore energy exploration and development; the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which is responsible for protecting the quality of the nation's waters; and the Gulf Council, which jointly manages the U.S. fisheries along with NOAA. Additionally, U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Coast Guard operations, as well as commercial shipping and other marine activities, occur in and around the waters of FGBNMS.

Subsection 304(e) of the NMSA requires NOAA to periodically review sanctuary management plans to evaluate progress toward implementing the management plan and goals for the sanctuary, and to revise the plans as necessary. This review ensures that national marine sanctuaries continue to best conserve and enhance their nationally significant resources (16 U.S.C. 1434(e)). The current FGBNMS management plan was published in 2012, and is available at <https://flowergarden.noaa.gov/management/2012mgmtplan.html>. With this management plan review, NOAA is interested in public input on the adequacy of existing management actions for the expansion areas as well as the pre-expansion areas.

The FGBNMS management plan review process is composed of four major stages: (1) information collection including through this request for information; (2) preparation and release of a draft management plan and a draft environmental review conducted under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and any proposed amendments to sanctuary regulations; (3) public review and comment on the draft documents; and (4) preparation and release of a final management plan and environmental review document, and any final amendments to sanctuary regulations, if applicable. NOAA will also, as applicable, address other statutory and regulatory

requirements pursuant to the Endangered Species Act, Marine Mammal Protection Act, Essential Fish Habitat provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, Coastal Zone Management Act, National Historic Preservation Act, and Tribal consultation responsibilities under Executive Order 13175.

## *II. Condition Report*

To inform the FGBNMS management plan review, NOAA recently published the FGBNMS Condition Report. The Condition Report, released in November 2024, assessed the period from 2009-2021 and presents summary information describing the status and trends of sanctuary resources, covering the broad categories of human activities and pressures, water quality, habitat, living resources, and maritime heritage resources. This report also included the status and trends of ecosystem services – the ways that humans benefit from the natural and cultural resources of the sanctuary. The report is available to the public online at <https://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/media/docs/2024-fgbnms-condition-report.pdf>.

## *III. Preliminary Topics of Focus*

NOAA is particularly interested in receiving public comment on the following topics as they relate to the management plan review. This list does not preclude or in any way limit the consideration of additional topics raised through public comments, and discussions with partner agencies.

### *Education and Community Outreach*

NOAA is seeking input on the effectiveness of its current education and outreach programs and new ideas for expanding public awareness, including new applications of technologies, new engagement spaces, and additional partnerships.

- What additional formal and informal educational partnerships should NOAA pursue?
- How can the application of new technologies enhance sanctuary education programs?

- How can development of partnerships and external funding sources complement and supplement NOAA's programs to advance progress toward the sanctuary's goals and objectives?

### *Responding to Environmental Pressures and Long-Term Trends*

NOAA is seeking input on the effectiveness of the sanctuary's management responses to pressures.

- How can the new management plan effectively address issues for both shallow coral and deep mesophotic habitats, as identified in the 2009-2021 Condition Report (<https://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/media/docs/2024-fgbnms-condition-report.pdf>) and the 2023 Vulnerability Assessment (<https://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/media/docs/20231201-fgnms-cva-final-report.pdf>)?
- What emergency response and restoration plans are necessary to address potential increases in occurrences of acute environmental stressors, such as coral bleaching events?
- How can NOAA better address invasive species?
- What collaboration and coordination among government agencies and jurisdictions is necessary or helpful to advance effective stewardship of sanctuary resources?

### *Research and Monitoring*

NOAA is seeking input on critical research needs for effective management and new research partnerships.

- What research and monitoring activities are necessary to address topics identified in the 2024 Science Needs assessment (<https://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/science/assessment/flower-garden-banks/>) across the multiple habitats at all 17 banks of the sanctuary?
- What new partnerships could potentially address research gaps in a resource-constrained environment, including sharing of federal and non-federal data, platforms, and equipment?

- What research and monitoring activities are necessary to adequately monitor and understand mesophotic habitats?
- What new or emerging technologies could cost-effectively enhance support for research and monitoring efforts?

#### *Resource Use*

NOAA is seeking input on how to effectively monitor resource use and visitation, improve access, and ensure that uses are compatible with ecosystem health. Consistent with the policies and principles of Executive Order 14313 (July 3, 2025) NOAA aims to prioritize responsible conservation, restore our lands and waters, and protect our Nation's outdoor heritage for the enjoyment of the American people.

- What actions are or could be effective to ensure visitor safety, facilitate visitor access, and support compatible use of sanctuary resources?
- How can NOAA improve monitoring and understanding of resource use, regulation compliance, and regulation enforcement in the remotely located sanctuary?
- What strategic partnerships should NOAA pursue to maintain and enhance infrastructure for access, such as mooring buoys, in a resource-constrained program environment?

#### *IV. Boundaries and Regulations*

At this time NOAA also does not expect to undertake any major rulemaking actions as part of this management plan review process.

**Authority:** 16 U.S.C. 1431 *et seq.*

**John Armor,**

*Director, Office of National Marine Sanctuaries,*

*National Ocean Service,*

*National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.*

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