



National Oceanic and
Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

NOAA announces process to designate national marine sanctuary off central California

Agency seeks public comment to initiate development
of draft plan

Focus areas: Sanctuaries, Ocean & Coasts **Topics:** sanctuaries, marine protected areas

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Deepwater bubblegum coral, a host for California king crab, observed during 2020 E/V Nautilus exploration of the Santa Lucia Bank. Corals and sponges that make up the area's seafloor habitats provide food and shelter for recreationally and commercially important fish species. (NOAA)

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NOAA today announced it is seeking public comment on the first steps toward designating a new national marine sanctuary in a 7,000 square mile area off the central California coast, adjacent to San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties.

The designation of a Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary would protect the region's important marine ecosystem, maritime heritage resources and cultural values of Indigenous communities, while allowing NOAA to manage compatible uses within its boundaries. The National Marine Sanctuaries Act allows NOAA to designate and protect areas of marine and Great Lakes environments with special national significance.

As directed by President Biden's Executive Order on [Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad](#), NOAA and other federal agencies seek to take a holistic approach to curbing and building resilience to climate change and its impacts. This includes conserving and restoring ocean and coastal habitats, supporting tribally and locally led stewardship, and advancing offshore wind and other clean energy

projects. Advancing both the sanctuary designation process and wind energy development in the area, such as the proposed Morro Bay 399 Area, will demonstrate the Biden-Harris Administration's commitments to these important and complementary goals.


"This Administration is committed to taking a holistic approach to addressing the climate crisis, said Gina M. Raimondo, U.S. Secretary of Commerce. "Together, the Department of Commerce, through NOAA, and the Department of Interior, along with many partners, are increasing resilience by conserving and restoring the natural and cultural resources that benefit our country and our planet; working to reduce emissions by fostering clean energy like offshore wind; and supporting frontline communities by helping them build back smarter and adapt to the impacts of climate change. Proposals like the Chumash Heritage sanctuary and Morro Bay 399 Area are great examples of how we can advance these goals in conjunction with each other."

"This proposal demonstrates the Biden-Harris administration's commitment to lifting up community-led efforts to conserve our lands and waters and strengthen our economy," said Deb Haaland, Secretary of the Interior. "Local voices, Indigenous knowledge, and collaborative stewardship will be integral to our efforts to bolster community resilience, protect our natural resources, and build a clean energy economy."

"On California's Central Coast, we have a chance to both harness the wind energy potential of our ocean and better protect the area's extraordinary natural and cultural heritage," said Gina McCarthy, National Climate Advisor. "To tackle the climate crisis we must – and we will – move ahead simultaneously with conservation and smartly-sited clean energy production."

"The recent oil spill in California is a costly and harmful reminder that we need to do more to protect our coastal communities from the threats that our ocean is facing," said Brenda Mallory, Chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality. "The Chumash Heritage sanctuary proposal and the Morro Bay wind

energy area provide an opportunity for communities to help shape how we both protect the region's extraordinary marine and cultural resources and harness the ocean's clean energy potential."

The Northern Chumash Tribal Council (NCTC), led by the late Chief Fred Harvey Collins, [nominated the area in 2015](#)  asking NOAA to consider it for sanctuary designation noting that it was an important way to preserve and recognize tribal history, safeguard marine resources, and open new doors for research and economic growth.

The nomination, championed with broad community support, also identifies opportunities for NOAA to expand upon existing local and state efforts to study, interpret, and manage the area's unique natural and cultural resources. The area encompasses tribal history and an internationally significant ecological transition zone, where cooler, nutrient-rich temperate waters from the north meet warmer waters of the subtropics, providing a haven for marine mammals, invertebrates, sea birds, and fish. It includes kelp forests, vast sandy beaches and coastal dunes, as well as wetlands. These ecosystems serve as nurseries for numerous commercially and recreationally fished species, and critical habitat for threatened and endangered wildlife such as blue whales, the southern sea otter, black abalone, snowy plovers and leatherback sea turtles. In addition, NOAA has documented more than 200 shipwrecks in the area, two of which the agency worked to have listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

NOAA is seeking public comment on a proposed designation that advances NCTC's nomination, with the nomination's boundaries adjusted to exclude the area that overlaps with the proposed Morro Bay 399 Area. On May 25, 2021, the Departments of the Interior and Defense, Gina McCarthy, Senior Climate Advisor to the President, and the State of California [announced their agreement to identify 399 square miles near Morro Bay for wind energy development](#), which will contribute to towards the Administration's goal to deploy 30 gigawatts of offshore wind by 2030.

“The proposed sanctuary will recognize and preserve Chumash tribal heritage, protect the area’s rich biodiversity, and build resilience to changing ocean conditions,” said Rick Spinrad, Ph.D., NOAA Administrator. “This special section of coast supports a way of life for many communities that rely on commercial fishing and enjoy recreational fishing, kayaking, surfing, diving, and wildlife watching. NOAA heard strong support from tribal leaders, a diverse set of groups, state officials, and several members of the California congressional delegation for moving forward with this proposed national marine sanctuary.”

NOAA requests specific input on the sanctuary name, sanctuary boundary, compatible uses, threats a new sanctuary would address, how best to promote marine science and education initiatives and other topics as described in the Notice of Intent.

The results of the scoping process will assist NOAA with the preparation of draft designation documents, which NOAA will also release for public comment. Multiple steps in the well-established, highly participatory designation process will follow as NOAA continues to determine if final designation is warranted and, if so, what NOAA program and management actions are necessary.

The public can comment on the proposed sanctuary designation until January 10, 2022 through the Federal eRulemaking Portal, www.regulations.gov. The docket number is NOAA-NOS-2021-0080. NOAA will also host virtual public meetings on December 8, December 13, and January 6, during which members of the public can offer oral comments.

A detailed description of the proposed sanctuary, as well as additional information about opportunities to provide comment, can be found at <http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/Chumash-heritage>.

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