

Draft Framework for Developing the National System of Marine Protected Areas Questions and Answers



Why is the U.S. developing a national system of marine protected areas (MPAs)?

Based on criteria detailed in the draft national MPA system framework, more than 1,000 existing sites (MPAs) have been created and are managed by a variety of federal, state, territorial, tribal, and local governments for a wide range of conservation and sustainable production purposes. Despite the increasing popularity of MPAs as a tool to maintain healthy ecosystems, there has been no nationally coordinated approach through which these MPAs might work together to effectively protect the nation's natural and cultural resources.

The need for a coordinated, science-based, and effective national system of MPAs was formally recognized in Executive Order 13158 on MPAs, which was signed in May 2000. Ultimately, the national system will provide a process for agencies and stakeholders to work together to achieve regional and national goals that they may not accomplish individually. The framework for developing the national system, also a requirement under the MPA Executive Order, was recently drafted and released for public comment. It outlines a proposal for how government agencies and stakeholders can work together to build this national system.

What does the draft framework for developing the national system of MPAs do?

The draft framework provides comprehensive national goals and flexible guidance for a variety of partnership efforts among federal, state, tribal, and local governments and stakeholders to develop an effective national system. It proposes guidance for how existing MPA sites, programs, and stakeholders can work together to better share information and coordinate their MPA management efforts, develop the necessary scientific information to make more informed management decisions, and improve the stewardship and effectiveness of existing of MPAs.

Why did it take so long to develop the framework?

The process for drafting the framework involved a wide range of stakeholders around the country and dozens of government agencies and programs at many levels. A major first step that the MPA Center took was to understand what marine conservation areas currently exist in federal, state, and territorial waters, in order to identify potential partners and understand the potential scope of the national system. This process alone—identifying and obtaining information about the existing MPAs managed by federal agencies and agencies in the 35 coastal states and territories—took several years, but was necessary to provide a firm foundation from which to proceed with system development. At the same time, the MPA Center worked closely with the Department of the Interior to convene a group of federal agency representatives, and an MPA Federal Advisory Committee representing diverse stakeholders, to provide direction and recommendations for building a national system. The MPA Center also reached out extensively to state, territorial, local, and tribal government partners, including federal and state fisheries councils and commissions, as well as coastal communities and business and conservation organizations to discuss their ideas on developing an effective national system.

These efforts to understand existing conservation areas and to foster partnerships and discussions with diverse MPA agencies and stakeholders required a significant investment of time. In the end, however, we believe the resulting draft framework provides a solid foundation for the long-term cooperative efforts necessary to create an effective national system of MPAs.

Who was involved with or consulted during drafting of the national system framework?

The MPA Center sought advice from federal, tribal, state, territorial, and local government agencies and MPA programs, non-governmental organizations, anglers, academics, commercial fishermen, coastal communities, energy industry representatives, and other members of the public. The MPA Center also received formal recommendations from the MPA State Advisory Group and the MPA Federal Advisory Committee, collected comments and feedback from nine MPA Center-sponsored workshops around the country, and presented information at approximately fifty other meetings and workshops of MPA stakeholder groups. The MPA Center will continue to consult stakeholders as we move forward with building the national system.

What will the national system do for me and my community?

A national system of MPAs will:

- help increase efficient protection of U.S. marine resources by enhancing government cooperation;
- support the national economy by helping to sustain fisheries and maintain healthy marine ecosystems for tourism and recreation businesses; and
- promote public participation in MPA decision-making by improving access to scientific and public policy information.

Through this framework, agencies and stakeholders will work together more effectively to conserve the marine resources we all care about and depend on now and for future generations.

Does the national system create new MPA sites, regulations or legislation?

No. The national system framework does not establish any new authorities, designate new MPAs, or introduce new MPA legislation. It proposes a system that will be built from existing MPAs through partnerships with existing management programs and agencies. The framework also outlines a collaborative process for existing state and federal MPA programs and stakeholders to identify priority conservation areas where new or strengthened MPAs may be needed to more effectively protect significant natural and cultural resources. Any new or strengthened MPAs would need to be established by existing MPA programs using their own legal authorities and regulatory processes.

Does the national system give the federal government the authority to override the MPA authorities of states, territories and tribes?

No. Although MPA sites that elect to participate will be part of the national system, their management and level of government remain the same. For example, if the Commonwealth of Massachusetts chooses an ocean sanctuary to participate in the national system, the site would continue to be managed by the Commonwealth and its regulations would not change. The proposed national system will be built on cooperative partnerships. It is not a new overarching MPA authority.

Is government participation in the national system mandatory?

The MPA Executive Order calls on federal agencies and other governmental and non-governmental partners to build the national system. Like all executive orders, the MPA order only applies directly to federal agencies. State, territory, local, and tribal government participation is voluntary. Non-federal government partners, however, play a critical role in the management of the nation's marine resources; in fact, they manage about 85 percent of the nation's 1,000 existing MPAs. Therefore, NOAA and the Department of the Interior believe partnerships with state, tribal, and local governments to be critical to the success of the effort to develop the national system.

How do existing MPA systems, such as the national marine sanctuaries or the national estuarine research reserves, fit into this national system?

These existing MPA systems are the building blocks of the proposed national system. In essence, the national system of MPAs will be a system of sites and systems. By the nature of its formation, it will forge partnerships across MPA systems, programs, and levels of government. It will enhance existing MPA efforts by encouraging shared planning, science, stewardship, technical, or other priorities.

How can I read and comment on the draft framework?

The draft framework was published for public comment on September 22, 2006, and is available for a 145-day public comment period from that date. You will find contact information and instructions for how to provide formal comments in the draft framework document and the corresponding *Federal Register* notice announcement, both of which are linked from the www.MPA.gov website.

When will the final framework be published?

The draft framework was published on September 22, 2006, for a 145-day public comment period. At the end of that period, the MPA Center will review all the comments received and develop and publish a final framework. This process will take about a year, meaning that that final framework is likely to be available in late 2007. Both the draft and the final framework will be available on www.MPA.gov.

For more information, write to: mpa.comments@noaa.gov.

