NOAA’s Office of National Marine Sanctuaries is initiating the process to consider designating marine portions of Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument as a national marine sanctuary under the National Marine Sanctuaries Act.

The area has a long history of being considered for national marine sanctuary designation, beginning with an executive order in 2000 by President William J. Clinton. President George W. Bush designated the monument in 2006 based in part on the sanctuary designation process that was already underway. In 2016, President Barack H. Obama followed the original monument designation with a Presidential Proclamation to expand the monument to its current boundaries. In December 2020, Congress directed NOAA to initiate the sanctuary designation process, which does not change the status of the monument.

National marine sanctuary designation would add the conservation benefits to the marine areas of Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument by providing a stable regulatory framework and additional protections to safeguard living, cultural, and maritime heritage resources. The co-management structure that is a hallmark of the monument will continue. NOAA’s Office of National Marine Sanctuaries has been a key partner and co-managing agency in the management of Papahānaumokuākea since the initial designation of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve in 2000.

This map of Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument includes both the original and expanded boundaries. Proposed national marine sanctuary designation would only consider marine waters of the monument, and not terrestrial areas. Image: NOAA
The designation process will be conducted in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state of Hawai‘i, and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs. There will be significant opportunities for public comment. Native Hawaiian culture is a foundational element of the management of Papahānaumokuākea, and sanctuary designation will continue to honor and perpetuate spiritual and cultural relationships with this special place.

Designation as a national marine sanctuary would strengthen and increase the long term protections already existing in the monument, but cannot diminish them. It would enhance existing authorities and the regulatory and enforcement framework. The establishment of a national marine sanctuary would ensure strong and lasting protection for the marine waters of the monument, and would not include any terrestrial areas.

The process to designate a national marine sanctuary will be done in concert with the monument’s co-managing agencies. The foundational framework of any sanctuary designation and future updates to the Monument Management Plan will be done in coordination to ensure consistency of protections.

For more information
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