



Southern Shrimp Alliance

P.O. Box 1577 Tarpon Springs, FL 34688
955 E. MLK Dr. Suite D Tarpon Springs, FL 34689
727-934-5090 Fax 727-934-5362

October 24, 2022

TO: Sarah Fangman,
Superintendent
Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary
33 East Quay Rd.
Key West, FL 33040.

RE: NOAA Proposed Rule to Expand the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Boundaries,
NOAA-NOS-2019-0094, 87 FR 42800, July 18, 2022

The Southern Shrimp Alliance (SSA) appreciates the opportunity to provide input on this important Proposed Rule. Founded in 2002, SSA's membership is comprised of many small, family-owned shrimp fishing businesses and associated shoreside enterprises operating in coastal communities in all eight warm-water shrimp producing states from North Carolina to Texas. This includes shrimp fishermen and associated shoreside business and communities that would be directly affected by this proposed action to expand the boundaries of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS).

SSA has a long and extensive history of direct engagement in efforts to deconflict shrimp fishing activity with sensitive habitats including, especially, coral habitats in both the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic regions. In each case to date, SSA has worked diligently and collaboratively with expert scientists and managers from NOAA, the Regional Fishery Management Councils, the academic community, and others to use the best available science to document coral habitat and shrimp fishing effort with the dual goals to protect such habitat from damage and to preserve traditional shrimp fishing grounds. To a significant extent, these efforts have been successful, and we are proud of our contributions to these mostly positive results.

Much of the work SSA has done in this respect has been through participation in the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's (Council) Shrimp Advisory Panel (Shrimp AP) on which a number of SSA's leadership and representatives serve. In fact, SSA's initial engagement on this Proposal to expand the boundaries of the FKNMS is well documented in the Minutes of the September 16, 2019, Joint Meeting of the Special Coral Scientific and Statistical Committee and Coral and Shrimp Advisory Panels (2019 Joint AP meeting).¹

SSA requests that the Minutes of the 2019 Joint AP meeting be reviewed and considered by NOAA, and that they be included in the record of decision for this proposed action.

During that 2019 Joint AP meeting, SSA representatives engaged in extensive discussion with FKNMS staff on the details of the boundary expansions under consideration and what their purposes and implications were. This included review of the locations of scientifically documented coral habitat as well as of shrimp fishing effort the precise location of which is well documented by NOAA through the use of electronic logbooks installed on shrimp fishing vessels.

As documented in those Minutes of the 2019 Joint AP meeting, FKNMS staff indicated that the purposes of the then-proposed northwest and southwest extensions of the FKNMS were to protect the habitat from large vessel damage from groundings and to provide a boundary line that would be administratively easier to enforce. There was only minimal reference in that discussion to any ecological significance of the areas captured within those proposed boundary expansions other than vague references to some research being conducted that might suggest an undefined ecological and genetic connectivity between Pulley Ridge and the Florida Keys. There was no data on the results of that research provided to the 2019 Joint AP meeting or how that might specifically relate to any impacts of shrimp fishing effort in the area.

During the Joint AP meeting SSA representatives and others also stressed that the most critical impacts to coral in the FKNSM were from two sources –

- 1) the degradation of water quality due to Federal and State actions (or lack thereof) taken locally in the Florida Keys and elsewhere in Florida and the Gulf of Mexico, and
- 2) the 'over-use' by recreational activities of the Sanctuary exacerbated by the growth of the human population and tourism in Florida.

It was recommended that NOAA should substantially increase their focus on these pernicious threats to the FKNMS coral habitat and broader ecosystem rather than undocumented impacts of shrimp fishing in the area.

¹ https://gulfcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Minutes_GMFMC-Joint-Coral-SSC-and-Coral-and-Shrimp-APs_September-2019.pdf

As a consequence of those discussions of these and other issues at the 2019 Joint AP meeting, SSA representatives on the Shrimp AP reached the conclusion that the proposed FKNMS boundary expansions and impacts on the shrimp fishery were not justified and offered the following two motions to specifically oppose the proposed northwestern and southern boundary expansions (See 2019 Joint AP Meeting Summary).²

Motion (Shrimp AP Only): to oppose the proposed northwestern expansion of the FKNMS boundary.

Motion carried with no opposition.

Motion (Shrimp AP Only): the Shrimp AP is not in favor of the FKNMS southern boundary expansion.

Motion carried with no opposition.

SSA requests that this Meeting Summary also be reviewed and considered by NOAA, and that it also be included in the record of decision for this proposed action.

SSA had another opportunity to review in considerable detail the FKNMS expansions set forth in this Proposed Rule as members of the Shrimp AP at the recent September 12, 2022, Joint Coral, Shrimp, and Spiny Lobster AP meeting (2022 Joint AP meeting).

Following presentations by and discussions with FKNMS staff, SSA representatives once again stressed that no data or results of scientific research or other scientific information had been presented since the 2019 Joint AP meeting documenting the ecological significance of the proposed expansion areas, or of any specific impacts of shrimp fishing activity on coral habitat within those proposed expansion areas. SSA representatives further reiterated that NOAA should prioritize its focus instead on the existential threats of water quality and Sanctuary 'over-use' which are insufficiently addressed in the Proposed Rule. A Summary and, potentially, the Minutes of the 2022 Joint AP meeting are expected to be posted on the Council website which will include the motions adopted by the Shrimp AP as discussed below.³

SSA requests that the Meeting Summary and, if available, the Minutes of the 2022 Joint AP meeting also be reviewed and considered by NOAA, and that they also be included in the record of decision for this proposed action.

Consequently, SSA representatives and others on the Shrimp AP reached the conclusion that nothing had changed to justify a change to their position since the 2019 Joint AP meeting, and that the only purposes of these extensions of the FKNMS documented in the record continue to be to protect the habitat from large vessel damage from groundings and to provide boundaries that were administratively easier to enforce – purposes completely unrelated to the shrimp fishery or its potential impacts on coral habitat.

² https://gulfcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Meeting_summary_Joint_Coral_Shrimp_September2019.pdf

³ <https://gulfcouncil.org/ap-archive/>

With all that in mind, and in an effort to prevent any unjustified adverse impacts on the shrimp industry, the Shrimp AP adopted the following motions to oppose all of the proposed boundary expansions set forth in this Proposed Rule—motions that were also endorsed by the Members of the Council’s Spiny Lobster AP:

Motion: The Shrimp and Spiny Lobster APs oppose the proposed northwestern expansion of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary boundary.

Motion carried with no opposition.

Motion: The Shrimp and the Spiny Lobster APs are not in favor the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary boundary expansion westward from the Tortugas Ecological Reserve South and the boundary expansion between the Tortugas Ecological Reserve South and the Dry Tortugas.

Motion carried with no opposition.

Motion: The Shrimp and the Spiny Lobster APs are not in favor of the southernly expansion of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary boundary which encompasses the Area to be Avoided.

Motion carried with no opposition.

SSA and its members remain committed to their role in protecting sensitive coral habitats from any damage caused by shrimp fishing activities and look forward to continue working with NOAA and other authorities to achieve that goal. That said, such protections must meet the fundamental standard that they are based on the best available scientific information conclusively documenting the existence and location and ecological significance of coral habitat as well as the location of shrimp fishing effort as precisely documented by NOAA’s ELB data.

After extensive review and consideration, including participation two meetings of the Shrimp AP with NOAA, SSA asserts that the proposed boundary expansions set forth in this Proposed Rule simply do not meet this standard. The shrimp industry, including the associated shoreside enterprises and fishery dependent communities, should not be made to suffer adverse social and economic impacts on their operations, economics, or communities simply for the administrative convenience of NOAA and FKNMS managers.

Instead, SSA requests that NOAA pursue alternative and more effective strategies for protecting the FKNMS’s coral habitat from large vessel damage - and from water quality degradation and Sanctuary over-use – than simply expanding the Sanctuary boundaries to the detriment of the shrimp industry.

Thank you for your serious consideration of our inputs. We would be happy to respond to any questions or requests for information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Williams". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "John" being more prominent than the last name "Williams".

John Williams,
Executive Director