



Sanctuary Reaches Higher Level of Protection

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State waters of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary reached a higher level of protection on June 19, 2002, when a No Discharge Zone (NDZ) designation took effect. Under rules published by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), boaters must now pump out their sewage or make sure their marine sanitation devices (MSDs) cannot discharge overboard while in state waters.

“Now that we are making progress in dealing with local wastewater and stormwater management and restoring historic water flows from the Everglades, the No Discharge Zone designation provides an opportunity for the boating community to step up to the plate and do their part to help restore the quality of our nearshore waters,” said Sanctuary Superintendent Billy Causey. “At the request of the Sanctuary’s Water Quality Steering Committee, we will soon propose rules to establish a No Discharge Zone protecting federal waters of the Sanctuary as well.”



In state waters, mariners will now be required to use one of the pump-out stations located at marinas and state parks throughout the Keys.

Prior to June 19, regulations prohibited dumping untreated sewage into state waters, but allowed the discharge of treated sewage from Type I and Type II MSDs. These systems chop up solid waste and use chemicals to eliminate many bacteria and viruses, but they do not eliminate nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorous and other pollutants that contribute to poor water quality. The new rule does not require boaters to retrofit their vessel with a holding tank, but boaters who choose not to install holding tanks must ensure that their Type I or II MSD cannot discharge overboard while in state waters of the Sanctuary. Discharge of gray water (such as water from the galley and shower) remains legal in most areas. While EPA scientists estimate that nutrients from vessel discharges account for only 3% of the total nutrients in Sanctuary waters, nutrients and other pollutants from vessel discharge constitute a significant source of water pollution in harbors, marinas and other areas with poor circulation.

“Coral reef ecosystems depend on clear, nutrient poor water to thrive,” said Causey. “By eliminating another source of nutrients in the waters of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, we can easily relieve one more problem facing our already stressed marine environment”. The Sanctuary’s Water Quality Steering Committee and the Monroe County Board of County Commissioners asked Florida Governor Jeb Bush to seek the NDZ designation for all state waters of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. Governor Bush supported the proposed designation and, on December 7, 2000, he sent a letter to the EPA requesting this action. The EPA published the proposed rule for comment on July 26, 2001. Of 1,050 comments received, nearly 97% supported the designation as a necessary step in improving water quality in the Florida Keys.

Although the designation does not require EPA to ensure adequate availability of pump-out facilities, a survey by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection found adequate coverage in the most heavily populated areas of Monroe County, with 29 operating pump-out stations, two mobile pump-outs and several more pump-outs in the planning stages. Marinas that want to install pump-out stations or mobile pump-out boats can apply for grants of up to 75% of the project cost from the Clean Vessel Act (CVA) Grant Program. Since 1996, CVA grants totaling approximately \$520,000 have funded 18 pump out facilities in the Florida Keys.

A working group led by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and composed of representatives of federal, state and local governments, local environmental groups, and local marine professionals, is currently developing an implementation plan for the NDZ. This plan will include a public outreach and education program, a strategy to fund and develop adequate pump-out services in the Keys, and an enforcement strategy for implementation of the NDZ. For more information on the No Discharge Zone designation and how to comply, call 305.743.2437 or visit the Sanctuary’s web site at: floridakeys.noaa.gov.

*Note: This article appeared in the Summer 2002 issue of the newsletter of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, **Sounding Line**. For more information, visit: floridakeys.noaa.gov.*