International Designation for Keys Waters

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The United States Government, in a proposal developed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), is seeking international approval for a measure that would help protect the coral reefs, seagrass meadows and mangrove forests of the Florida Keys from threats posed by international shipping activity.

The proposal asks the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the international body responsible for international shipping issues, to designate the marine area around the Florida Keys as a "Particularly Sensitive Sea Area" (PSSA). The coral reef ecosystem of the Keys would be the third area in the world selected for this designation, joining Australia's Great Barrier Reef and Sabana-Camaguey Archipelago in Cuba. The PSSA would stretch from Biscayne National Park to the Tortugas.

The waters around the Florida Keys and the Tortugas are one of the most heavily trafficked shipping areas in the world. An estimated forty percent of the world's commerce passes within a day and a half sailing time of Key West. Ships can cause damage to the coral reef ecosystem through anchoring, groundings, collisions, and accidental and operational discharges of harmful substances.

"Designating the waters around the Florida Keys as a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area will bring international recognition of the ecological significance of our region," said Sanctuary Superintendent Billy Causey. "PSSA status will help educate the international shipping community about the sensitivity of coral reef resources to international shipping activities and increase compliance with domestic measures already in place to protect the area."

The Sanctuary Advisory Council (SAC) unanimously endorsed the proposal at its December 2000 meeting. "If any area deserves designation as a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area, it's the Florida Keys. The Sanctuary Advisory Council supports the proposal as a way to provide additional protection for our priceless coral reef ecosystem," said SAC vice chair Debra Harrison, Florida Keys Director for the World Wildlife Fund.

As part of the proposal, the United States will be seeking two additional measures to protect this area from damage by international shipping. First, the United States will request IMO recognition of three

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no-anchoring areas: a complete prohibition for all ships in the two sections of the proposed Tortugas Ecological Reserve, and a prohibition on anchoring by vessels 50 meters or greater in length on the remainder of Tortugas Bank.

NOAA designated Tortugas Bank as a no-anchor zone for ships 50 meters and greater in length in 1997 to halt destruction of the region's lush coral reefs by anchors as large as fifteen feet weighing several tons. While incidents have declined since the regulation took effect, NOAA has documented several violations of the no-anchoring area.

Although the no-anchoring zone appears on NOAA nautical charts and extensive efforts were made to educate the international shipping community about the regulation, many foreign-flagged vessels carry non-NOAA charts that do not show this zone. Since all international nautical charts must show IMO-adopted no-anchoring areas, this should increase compliance with anchoring restrictions in the Tortugas region.

The second measure is an amendment of one of the existing Areas To Be Avoided (ATBA). The proposal identifies the four Areas to be Avoided (ATBA) in the Sanctuary as a strategy for protecting the proposed PSSA. The legislation that created the Sanctuary also established these buffer areas that keep ships greater than 50 meters in length away from the reef tract.

The proposed amendment to the northernmost ATBA is in an area called the Elbow. Mariners have raised concerns that the oceanographic conditions in this area as well the configuration of the ATBA result in a potential convergence of northeasterly-bound and southwesterly-bound traffic. Although the

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amendment would not bring ship traffic any closer to the reef than the other areas of the ATBA, it would allow ships to increase the distance between these two opposing traffic patterns, thus increasing maritime safety in the area. By reducing the potential for collisions, the amendment would also reduce the threat to the coral reef from spills of oil, fuel and other contaminants.

NOAA expects the IMO to initially consider the proposal in April 2001. If approved, the committees could designate the area "in principle," while forwarding the no-anchoring area and ATBA amendment proposals to the appropriate Sub-committee and Committee for their consideration. The process will hopefully culminate in final PSSA designation in 2002.

Note: This article appeared in the Spring 2001 issue of the newsletter of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, **Sounding Line**. *For more information, visit:* floridakeys.noaa.gov**.**

PSSA Becomes Fully Effective in December 2002

On November 13, 2002, Deputy Secretary of Commerce Sam Bodman announced the creation of a new 3,000+ square nautical mile zone of protection around the sensitive and vulnerable coral reefs of the Florida Keys. The measure, the first in U.S. waters and only the fifth worldwide, is intended to reduce the threat of large foreign flagged ships damaging coral reefs and seagrass meadows in the area. The Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration built the protection package through the International Maritime Organization over the past few years.

The Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) became official on December 1,2002. A major benefit of the new designation is that it provides international recognition of the "Areas to be Avoided" and no-anchoring zones meant to prevent large ships from damaging delicate coral reefs. Nautical charts of the Florida Keys published throughout the world must now display the PSSA designation and outline these protective measures.

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