

**Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary  
Advisory Council Buoy Working Group - First Meeting**

**April 17, 2023 6:00-8:00pm**

**Location: Virtual**

**Attendance:**

- **Working Group Members:** Will Benson, Karen Angle, Elena Rodriguez, Lucja Rice, Dora DeMaria, Daniel Padron, Greg Eklund, George Garrett, Hailye Wilson
- **FKNMS/NOAA Staff:**
  - Nina Garfield – Working Group Staff Lead
  - Liz Trueblood – FKNMS Advisory Council Coordinator
  - Sarah Fangman – FKNMS Superintendent
  - Brady Booton – FKNMS Buoy Team Lead
  - Brittany Torres – FKNMS Buoy Team Member

**Opening Remarks:**

Working Group Co-Chair Will Benson and FKNMS Superintendent Sarah Fangman opened the meeting by welcoming members and introducing the context for the Buoy Working Group (BWG). The Working Group will discuss and identify buoy management recommendations to support the Restoration Blueprint priorities.

Each member was asked to introduce themselves and include in their introduction an issue that a revised buoy plan could solve for their constituency.

**Member introductions:**

Name: Will Benson

- **Constituency:** Flats Fishing, SAC Member, lifetime Keys resident
- **Recommendation:** proper marking of backcountry zones, interface with electronic manufacturers when new zones are ready for implementation
- **Reason:** minimize damage to bottom in backcountry, make the most of the interfaces through which the public engages
- **General, Clarifying, and/or parking lot Notes:** Flats, backcountry, and WMAs are his areas of expertise

Name: Hailye Wilson

- **Constituency:** USCG Representative to the working group, she is the waterways management chief at sector KW, here to serve as a partner, answer questions, and help bring awareness to the buoy program

Name: Elena Rodriguez

- Constituency: Retired from the dive industry, SAC member, in Keys 13 years
- Recommendation: sufficient mooring balls for dive boats, alleviate congestion on high traffic days, label balls to facilitate communication with public
- General, Clarifying, and/or parking lot Notes: curious about liveaboard moorings - George Garrett shared that these belong to, or permitted through, the Cities of Key West and Marathon

Name: Karen Angle

- Constituency: recreational fishing, SAC member, 16 years in the Keys, also worked as charter sailing captain w/ BSA, has primarily ocean side expertise
- Recommendation: many recreational fishers don't use mooring balls but are concerned about tourism impacts, concern about proper marking, SPA enforcement, proper use of moorings to minimize damage and buoy loss - noted concern for carrying capacity and education
- General, Clarifying, and/or parking lot Notes: education - how do we teach the public especially those from out of town to properly use buoys, maybe QR code on buoys?

Name: George Garrett

- Constituency: Middle Keys SAC rep, current SAC chair, Marathon City Manager, involved in original buoy plan in the 1990s
- Recommendation: consider carrying capacity and funding in these strategies

Name: Dora DeMaria

- Constituency: education SAC member, works at Reef Relief, lifelong Keys resident
- Recommendation: education - sees that some people assume all mooring buoys are for fishing, and don't realize they are in a SPA, proper use,

Name: Lucja Rice

- Constituency: diving, SAC member, Lower Keys, works at CFK, in Keys since 2007
- Recommendation: support large vessel moorings and education to match, many divers and industry users would like to see new buoys, many dive captains are interested in helping,

Name: Daniel Padron

- Constituency: commercial fishing, SAC member
- Recommendation: his constituency tends not to use mooring balls, but is affected by their use by other sectors - concern that lack of mooring balls leads to folks fishing in places they shouldn't, Ballyhoo fishers are concerned about being in the loop about additional buoys being placed in areas they use
- Reason: mitigate conflict between user groups

Name: Greg Eklund

Constituency: charter fishing, Islamorada

### **Working Group Business and Housekeeping:**

The group discussed the draft charter and group norms, no new norms were added. The group agreed to:

- Strive to represent views of your constituents
- Listen to other views with an open mind
- Explore creative opportunities and solutions
- Wear two hats: one as your constituent rep, and one as a working group member
- Be an active participant throughout process, be curious and engaged

The group discussed meeting times, and agreed that this time slot (6-8pm) works well for future virtual meetings.

### **FKNMS Buoy Program Presentation:**

Brady Booton, FKNMS buoy team leader, presented an overview of the current FKNMS buoy system including where buoys are currently located, how they are installed, and some issues that arise with improper use.

The working group discussed the presentation and asked questions:

- Will Benson asked Brady to explain the impacts of hurricanes and storm events on the buoy system
  - Brady explained Irma took out nearly half of buoys at some reefs, Ian had major impacts to the Tortugas area, storms can have a major impact
- Will Benson asked - does law enforcement issue warnings for improper use?
  - Not that we know of, no law enforcement on the line tonight (Capt. David Dipre of FWC was invited but unable to attend this session)
- Nina Garfield asked - do we ever GPS tag a buoy so if they drift away you could track it?
  - This has not been done in the past, buoys do have our phone number on them for return by community members, new buoys going out will have an email address on them as well
- Karen Angle asked - do buoy anchor points have any ID that would enable recreational divers to tell buoy team, "I found the manta for buoy #3, and the ball is missing?"
  - Brady answered no, but it is still helpful when users call in a missing buoy, even with just a general location.
- Karen - A thought on the QR code idea, this could be a quick way for someone *without* the sanctuary app to get the info, maybe it takes them to the app or website, for quick access.

- Lucja Rice - Does the buoy team have a schedule to dictate when you go to which buoy areas? Is this something that recreational users could assist with?
  - Brady answered that if the team gets word that a buoy downline looks like it will fail soon, it can be replaced before a total failure which over time, makes operations more efficient and cost effective.
  - Elena Rodriguez - can we train dive masters on what a buoy *should* look like? Maybe through Blue Star?
  - Brady thinks this is possible, it would be a matter of explaining the importance of being proactive, Blue Star could be a good avenue to explore
- Daniel Padron - what is the useful life of mooring ball downline, hardware, etc?
  - Brady - most mooring balls need a complete change out every three years, so they are on a rotation

### Strategy Brainstorm:

Nina Garfield led the group in a brainstorming session to get ideas and conversation flowing. The group had a robust conversation which is summarized here:

- Dive representatives shared that in certain spots (ie. Vandenberg) boats get out on the water early intentionally to get one of limited number of buoys - could a solution be the addition of sub-surface buoys?
  - Other sites for buoys - Cayman Salvor, Joe's Tug - sees need for other deep sites when Vandenberg isn't available - this would spread the users out
- Education:
  - Lucja shared that College of the Florida Keys teaches their divers via FKNMS videos, how can we help divers/captains teach each other?
  - Liveries (rental boat companies) - how can we enable them to easily and effectively educate their renters?
- Engaging the community:
  - How to make reporting missing or found buoys as easy as possible – buoy team shared that NEW stickers going out on all buoys starting this summer
    - Regional observers? Could make a round and verify that buoys were present, report missing buoys to the team
    - Will - thinks this is a way associations and industries can network and help
  - Could divers - maybe a designated group - be trained to help? Can also report chafing and other impacts, share when buoys are missing
  - Greg brought up an “adopt a buoy” program, stating that several folks have mentioned it to him, could give folks a sense of ownership in the process
  - Dora shared that she will be sending an anonymous survey to her education constituents, will share the results at the next meeting
- Could FKNMS charge a user fee?

- It would generate revenue for the program? Book a buoy in advance? To consider - booking ahead may not work for divers who decide which ball to go to based on sea conditions when they arrive at the site.
- Could we charge for commercial use vs recreational? Commercial users are making money using this program.
- Some cities charge liveboards for their buoy rental (city owns these buoys, not FKNMS)
- Could it be a question of sponsorship? To help support the program?
- Has FKNMS considered a fee? Like STINAPA in Bonaire? - Sarah shared that it has been discussed in the past, but never implemented, it's something that could be discussed further
- Driving force for the beginning of the buoy program was avoiding reef anchor damage - Will shares that in the backcountry this is happening now from both anchors and props, George echoed these concerns and the value of backcountry marking

Parking lot for things to come back to:

- QR codes
- For law enforcement - are warnings ever issued for improper use?
- How to engage and educate recreational users
- FKNMS Marine Sanctuary Explorer App ideas:
  - Report a missing buoy function
  - Buoy charts similar to [those on the website](#) - can we add them to the Sanctuary Explorer app? How best to incorporate this information into the app

The meeting adjourned at 8:00pm. The group will meet again in a few weeks, members can expect an email to discuss potential dates.