

**A RESOLUTION BY THE FLORIDA KEYS NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY ADVISORY COUNCIL IN
SUPPORT OF IMPLEMENTING THE FLORIDA KEYS NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY RESTORATION
BLUEPRINT**

WHEREAS, on November 16, 1990, Congress designated the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS); and

WHEREAS, the Sanctuary is jointly managed by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) in partnership with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), Monroe County, and other governmental agencies; and

WHEREAS, the FKNMS is a national treasure and protects 2,900 square nautical miles of unique and nationally significant marine resources, including most of one of the world's largest barrier reef ecosystems, 1.4 million acres of seagrass beds, 1,800 miles of mangrove-fringed shoreline, and more than 6,000 species of marine life, including sea turtles, manatees, and dolphins; and

WHEREAS, the FKNMS is part of a complex hydrological system that is influenced by waters from the upstream Greater Everglades ecosystem, spanning from Lake Okeechobee and its headwaters, to the Everglades Agricultural Area, Water Conservation Areas, Everglades National Park, Florida Bay, Biscayne Bay, Biscayne National Park, and mainland South Florida; and

WHEREAS, the FKNMS is an important economic driver and contributes \$4.4 billion annually to the state's economy, with approximately 60% of the Florida Keys economy directly tied to marine-related activities; and

WHEREAS, the FKNMS resources, including coral reefs, seagrass beds, and some fish populations, have been on the decline for decades due to impacts from increased use, marine debris, pollution, lack of freshwater delivery to Florida Bay, intensifying storms, disease outbreaks, accelerated coral bleaching from rising ocean temperatures, and ocean acidification; and

WHEREAS, FKNMS resources experienced a major marine heat wave in the summer of 2023 which catalyzed a significant coral bleaching and mortality event for corals and other benthic species – of which the full extent of impacts is currently being analyzed; and

WHEREAS, NOAA and FDEP's current management of the FKNMS is based on its 1997 final environmental impact statement (EIS) and a 2007 revised management plan which implemented sanctuary-wide regulations and established the nation's first comprehensive network of marine zones following years of planning, design, and public input; and

WHEREAS, the "Condition Report 2011 for the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary," (2011 Condition Report) the most recent document of its kind, classified Sanctuary water quality as "fair" or "fair/poor" and not improving, biologically structured habitats (e.g., coral reefs and seagrass beds) as "fair/poor" and declining, biodiversity as "fair/poor" and declining, and key species (e.g., corals) as "poor" and not improving, and this was before the onset of the devastating Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease in 2014 and 2023's heat wave impacts; and

WHEREAS, the 2011 Condition Report supported the need for additional management actions that address the degraded conditions of some key habitats and living resources in the FKNMS; and

WHEREAS, due to the 2011 Condition Report and its obligation to adaptively manage its resources, FKNMS released the "Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary: A Restoration Blueprint" (Restoration Blueprint) in 2019 to gather public input on management and regulatory options that could help counteract the decline in resource conditions, reduce threats, and, where appropriate, restore coral reefs, seagrasses, and other important habitats; and

WHEREAS, the FKNMS released the updated Restoration Blueprint, also known as the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, the "proposed rule" or the "draft rule," on July 12, 2022, with proposed actions to protect critical natural areas, improve zoning and marine management, and build ecological resiliency in conjunction with ongoing restoration efforts as well as sustainable uses; and

WHEREAS, the Sanctuary Advisory Council (SAC) recognizes that public input is vitally important to determining the future of the Florida Keys, has encouraged the public to engage in past FKNMS public comment opportunities and has hosted many meetings to solicit input from stakeholders and constituencies invested in the future of the FKNMS; and

WHEREAS, the SAC members worked collaboratively to provide comprehensive feedback to the FKNMS on the proposed rule over many months culminating in a two-day workshop in December, 2022; and

WHEREAS, the SAC recognizes the biological, recreational, and commercial importance of the marine resources of the FKNMS, and that protecting FKNMS resources is valuable not only for the environment but also for the economy; and

WHEREAS, the SAC recognizes that the special marine resources of the region, which led to the area's designation as a National Marine Sanctuary, contribute to the high quality of life for residents and high quality visitor experiences, and that without these unique marine resources, both quality of life and the economy of the Keys would decline; and

WHEREAS, the SAC recognizes that coral bleaching and coral disease impacts in the FKNMS are being exacerbated by more severe marine heat waves and rising ocean temperatures caused by climate change; and

WHEREAS, the management and regulatory changes in the Restoration Blueprint will help FKNMS resources be more resilient during and after future marine heat waves and coral bleaching events; and

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT THE FLORIDA KEYS NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY ADVISORY COUNCIL:

The SAC supports the rule and management plan as proposed by the FKNMS and outlined in the SAC advice and recommendations document from December 2022, including expanding sanctuary boundaries, strengthening protections for corals and other sensitive habitats, and addressing ongoing stressors to make the ecosystem more resilient. The SAC urgently calls on NOAA, FDEP, and FWC to prioritize the Restoration Blueprint and immediately allocate the necessary funding and resources to review, publish and finalize the rule and management plan expediently.