

Plan would protect 21 coral hot spots in Gulf of Mexico

November 14 2019, by Patrick Whittle



In this Sept. 4, 2009 photo provided by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, corals are seen at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico during an expedition called Reefs, Rigs and Wrecks. Federal regulators are close to approving a protection plan for vulnerable corals in the Gulf of Mexico that would create new protected zones designed to allow the corals to grow. The plan would create 21 protected areas off the coasts of Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and Florida (Dr. Ian MacDonald/National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration via AP)

A plan to protect corals in the Gulf of Mexico is close to becoming a law, drawing cheers from environmental groups who believe leaving the corals alone would help vulnerable ocean ecosystems to grow.

The plan would create 21 protected areas off the coasts of Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and Florida. Thirteen of the areas would carry new commercial fishing restrictions, and that has attracted the attention of fishing groups, who want the government to take a cautious approach.

Pew Charitable Trusts has characterized the plan as a way to protect nearly 500 square miles of slow-growing coral "hot spots," and is championing the protection plan as a way to spare vulnerable corals from fishing gear. The proposal would prohibit gear such as bottom trawls and dredges that can disrupt the corals.

Sandra Brooke, an oceanographer and [coral](#) ecology expert at Florida State University's Coastal and Marine Laboratory, said it's important to spare the corals because of their importance to the [marine environment](#) and because they can have value for the development of new medicines.

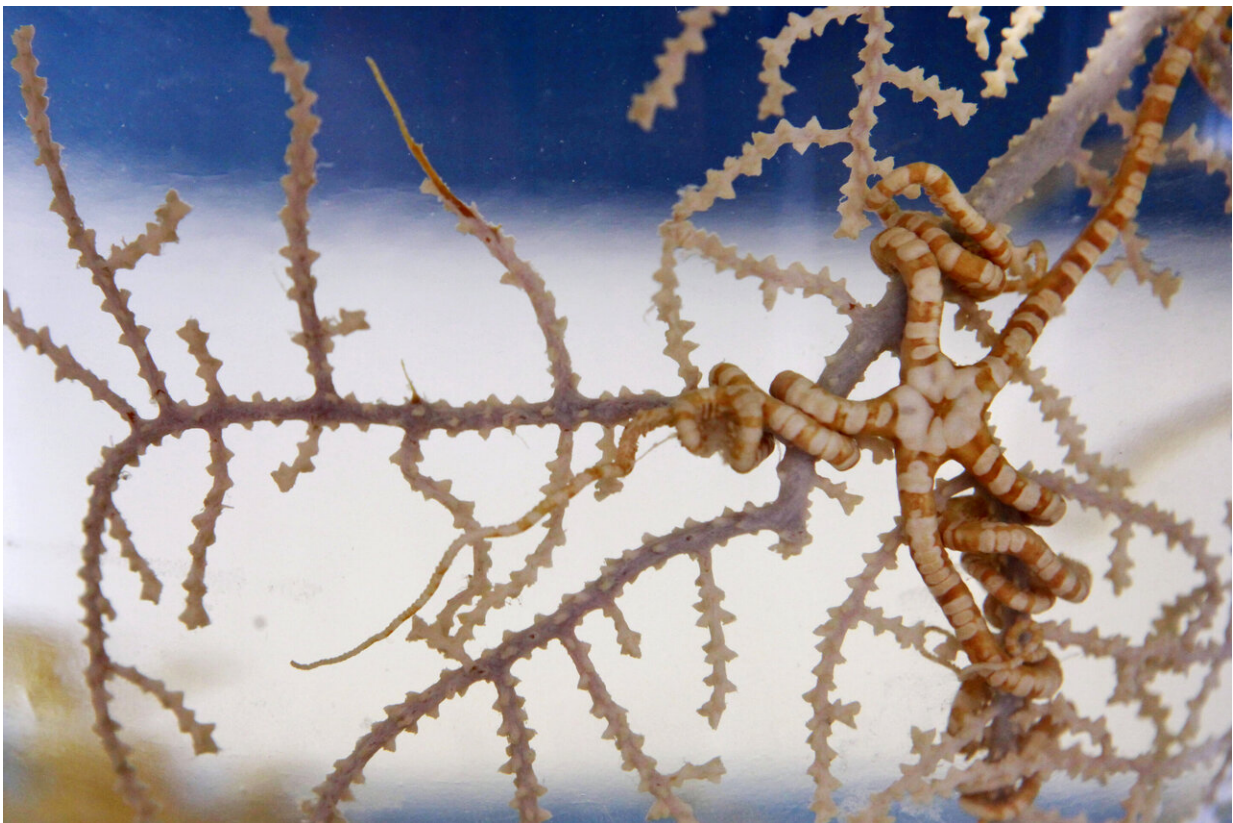
"If we continue squandering, we are going to end up in a really bad place, because we can't replicate what nature can do," Brooke said.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service is taking comments about the proposal until Nov. 25. The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, a regulatory panel, approved the plan last year, but NOAA must still provide final approval.

NOAA Fisheries said in a statement that most of the areas slated to be

protected are "extremely deep and fishing activity is sparse." However, harvesters of valuable species such as grouper and snapper said they do [fish](#) in the areas.

Greg Abrams, owner of Greg Abrams Seafood in Panama City, Florida, said his company also harvests golden tilefish in some of the areas slated for closure. He said the change could represent a hardship.



In this July 20, 2010 file photo, a soft coral and a brittle star, which were collected from the Gulf of Mexico, are displayed at the Smithsonian Museum Support Center in Suitland, MD. Federal regulators are close to approving a protection plan for vulnerable corals in the Gulf of Mexico that would create new protected zones designed to allow the corals to grow. The plan would create 21 protected areas off the coasts of Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi and Florida. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin, File)

"Each time you close the bottom or close the area, you put all the pressure on another area," Abrams said.

Another fisherman, Destin, Florida-based Ariel Seafoods president David Krebs, said protecting the corals is wise as long as it's done in a way that allows fishing groups to stay in business.

"I'm the guy who has watched, in his lifetime, different fisheries get fished down pretty hard and if it weren't for regulations, we would not survive," he said.

NOAA Fisheries has touted the proposal as a way to protect the corals while also sparing [fish habitat](#) from the impacts of commercial fishing. The agency has said that will ultimately support sustainable fisheries because it will improve the quality of ocean habitat where fish live, spawn and grow.

The corals provide shelter, breeding and feeding habitat for species that fishermen will ultimately rely upon for their catch, said Holly Binns, project director with Pew's Conserving Marine Life effort.

"We want to protect these corals because they are a habitat for these creatures that commercial fishermen who are targeting them need," Binns said. "It's incredibly important that we are protecting them before they get damaged."

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