

Proposed national marine sanctuary off California advances

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A group of people gather to watch the storm surge from high tides and big surf in the morning in Pismo Beach, Calif., Thursday, Jan. 7, 2016. A federal agency is taking a step toward designating a new national marine sanctuary off the central California coast that would be named for the indigenous people of the region. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced Tuesday, Nov. 9, 2021, that it is seeking public comment on the proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary. Credit: Joe Johnston/The Tribune of San Luis Obispo via AP, file

A federal agency announced Tuesday that it is taking a step toward designating a new national marine sanctuary off the central California coast that would be named for the region's Indigenous people.

The proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary would span 7,000 square miles (18,130 square kilometers) off San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said.

The area's ecosystems are rich in wildlife, provide habitat for threatened and endangered animals and serve as nurseries for commercially and recreationally fished species.

The designation was proposed in 2015 by the Northern Chumash Tribal Council to recognize and preserve tribal history, protect marine resources and create new opportunities for research and economic growth, NOAA said.

The agency will now seek public comment on the proposal, whose boundaries are set to exclude an area near Morro Bay proposed for offshore wind energy development.

The boundaries and the name are among specific issues that the agency is asking the public to comment on.

"I am thrilled the Biden administration has taken this step to protect our coastal areas from further oil and gas drilling and strengthen our state's \$1.9 trillion coastal economy, which is propped up by tourism and commercial fishing," said U.S. Rep. Salud Carbajal, a Democrat who represents the coastal region.



This photo provided by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shows deepwater bubblegum coral, a host for California king crab, observed during a 2020 exploration of the Santa Lucia Bank off the central coast of California. NOAA is taking a step toward designating a new national marine sanctuary off the central California coast that would be named for the indigenous people of the region. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced Tuesday, Nov. 9, 2021, that it is seeking public comment on the proposed Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary. Credit: NOAA via AP

California's Democratic U.S. senators also issued statements in support of the marine sanctuary.

"This designation will honor the heritage of the Chumash, who first sailed and fished this coastal region, and will preserve the natural beauty

and unique ocean ecology that is vital to the local economy," said Sen. Alex Padilla.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein said the designation would protect sacred Chumash cultural sites and save a large kelp forest.

The undersea forests face a range of threats—including overgrazing by sea urchins when there aren't enough otters and sea stars to keep urchin populations in check, according to NOAA.

Public comments can be submitted until Jan. 10, 2022. NOAA also plans virtual public meetings before then.

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