

# California to get first new national marine sanctuary in 32 years, banning offshore oil drilling along miles of coast

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A long-running effort by native tribes and environmentalists to establish the first new national marine sanctuary along California's coastline in 32

years—the aquatic version of a new national park—where offshore oil drilling would be prohibited forever, reached a key milestone on September 6.

The Biden administration published the final environmental impact statement for the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary, selecting boundaries that will stretch along 116 miles of coast in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties.

The area, which includes popular spots like Pismo Beach and the Gaviota Coast, is home to humpback whales, sea otters, leatherback sea turtles, kelp forests, rocky reefs and more than 200 shipwrecks. Under the proposal, the new [sanctuary](#) will cover 4,543 square miles—an area nearly four times the size of Yosemite National Park—and extend out to 60 miles offshore.

The Biden administration said Friday that it plans to publish final rules in October, with the designation officially finished by the time President Joe Biden leaves office in January. Former President Donald Trump, during his time in office, attempted to allow new [offshore oil drilling](#) along California, Oregon and Washington.

The plans never came to fruition, however, due to local and state opposition, including a law former Gov. Jerry Brown signed in 2018 banning the construction of new pipelines, terminals, and other oil drilling equipment in state waters out to three miles off the coast.

The Chumash sanctuary will be the first national marine sanctuary in the nation proposed by a Native American tribe. The Northern Chumash Tribe, based in Los Osos, near Morro Bay, began advocating for the idea in 2015.

"This is a huge moment for the Chumash People and all who have

tirelessly supported our campaign over the years," said Violet Sage Walker, chairwoman of the Northern Chumash Tribal Council, on Friday.

Walker, whose late father, tribal Chief Fred Collins, led the campaign until his death in 2021, noted that tribal members "will always be connected to past, present and future by this special stretch of coastline and the true magic its waters hold."

Chumash and Salinan people have lived along the Central California coast for thousands of years.

Under the proposed rules, tribes will be involved with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in managing the new sanctuary. As with most sanctuaries, offshore oil and gas drilling, along with undersea mining, will be prohibited. No new rules are proposed for commercial or recreational fishing.

Nevertheless, many commercial fishermen in the area have opposed a new sanctuary.

"We're worried about new regulations. What are we in for here?" said Tom Hafer, president of the Morro Bay Commercial Fishermen's Organization. "There are already so many rules we have to abide by. This is another thing we have to worry about."

Hafer fishes for black cod and spot prawns from his 43-foot boat, the "Kathryn H." He said there are about 35 other commercial fishermen in the Morro Bay area who catch salmon, rockfish, abalone Dungeness crab, all of whom already fall under strict state and federal regulations.

"We are a little wary, a little scared," he said Friday.

America has 15 national marine sanctuaries. They can be established by Congress or the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) under a law signed in 1972 by former President Richard Nixon.

California has four: Monterey Bay, which stretches from the Golden Gate Bridge to Hearst Castle, Channel Islands off Southern California, Gulf of the Farallones off San Francisco, and Cordell Bank off Marin County.

The last national marine sanctuary to be established in California was Monterey Bay, by George H.W. Bush in 1992, which ended years of political battles after former President Ronald Reagan proposed to allow offshore oil drilling off Big Sur, the San Mateo coast and other parts of Northern California.

One of the main controversies in the Chumash sanctuary, which involved years of public hearings and more than 100,000 public comments, involved offshore wind farms.

Originally, sanctuary supporters proposed that its boundaries abut the southern edge of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, near Hearst Castle.

But Biden and Gov. Gavin Newsom have supported the construction of floating offshore wind farms off Morro Bay and Humboldt County to provide clean energy. In selecting Friday's proposed alternative, NOAA left a gap around Morro Bay out of the new sanctuary to allow [undersea cables](#) to connect future offshore wind turbines to the state's electrical grid.

Tribal leaders and environmental groups have suggested that once the wind farms are built, the sanctuary boundaries could be enlarged.

On Friday, one of California's top environmental officials voiced support for that idea.

"There is an interest in a second phase that could expand the sanctuary northward once cables are laid," said Wade Crowfoot, California's secretary of natural resources. "We need to cross that bridge when we come to it, but I support a focused discussion on how we can expand the boundaries."

Crowfoot said the Newsom administration is very pleased that the sanctuary is at the finish line.

"It's a huge deal," he said. "That part of the coast is really important environmentally. It's where the Southern Current meets the Northern Current. There is a remarkable ecological richness. Biologically, it's a really sensitive and important place, and culturally, it's also very, very important. This coast that will now be protected is fundamental to the Chumash people."

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