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NOAA releases new management plan for Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary

New exemption for marker buoys finalized

NOAA's Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary published a final rule and environmental assessment today which now permits the use of weighted marker buoys in the sanctuary, an important safety measure for recreational diving and an enhancement for recreational fishing.

The rule and assessment is part of the sanctuary's revised management plan. The rule takes effect on August 18.

While sanctuary regulations prohibit the placement of any material on the seafloor, an exemption now allows for weighted marker buoys up to 10 pounds and with a maximum of one-quarter inch buoy line to be deployed and continuously tended by fishers and divers. An allowable marker buoy cannot be attached to a vessel, cannot be capable of holding a boat at anchor, and must be removed within 12 hours of being deployed.

Weighted marker buoys provide a reference point for vessels assisting divers. In addition, recreational anglers may use marker buoys to mark and relocate a fishing spot as their boat drifts. Public comments and sanctuary advisory council discussion during the review process of the sanctuary's management plan in 2012 indicated strong support for the weighted marker buoy exemption.

"We are pleased that this new marker buoy exemption will encourage safe diving practices in Gray's Reef," said George Sedberry, acting sanctuary superintendent. "The revised management plan provides a framework for the sanctuary to strengthen protection of its resources, while enhancing visitor safety and convenience. Our local community helped develop this plan and we hope they continue to give us their input."

Managed by NOAA as part of the National Marine Sanctuary System, Gray's Reef is one of the largest near-shore live-bottom reefs off the southeastern United States, encompassing approximately 22 square miles. The live bottom and ledge habitat support an abundant reef fish and invertebrate community and the reef is in the only known calving ground for the highly endangered North Atlantic right whale.

Congress requires periodic management plan review for each of NOAA's 13 national marine sanctuaries to ensure that they continue to conserve, protect, and enhance their nationally significant living and cultural resources while allowing compatible commercial and recreational activities. The final management plan and environmental assessment may be downloaded from the sanctuary's website: <http://graysreef.noaa.gov>.

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