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**NOAA releases draft management plan for Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary**  
New exemption for marker buoys proposed

NOAA's Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary today released a comprehensive draft management plan, proposed rulemaking and environmental assessment for public review and comment. The draft plan is a result of scientific study and a public participatory process, and proposes regulatory changes that would allow the use of weighted marker buoys in the sanctuary, which are important for diver safety and fishing.

Currently, sanctuary regulations prohibit anchoring in the sanctuary and the placement of any material on the seafloor, including weights that mark locations during recreational diving or fishing. NOAA is proposing an exemption for weighted marker buoys that are "continuously tended" by fishers and divers and are not attached to a vessel and not capable of holding a boat at anchor.

The weighted marker buoys would be used for diving safety and to help recreational anglers mark and relocate a fishing spot as their boat drifts. Public comments and sanctuary advisory council discussion during the process to review the sanctuary's management plan in 2012 indicated strong support for the weighted marker buoy exemption.

"The new draft management plan reflects some of the emerging issues to be addressed by our staff over the next five to 10 years to protect and conserve marine resources in the sanctuary," said George Sedberry, acting superintendent. "This is a collaborative effort and we welcome further public input as we go forward with the important job of managing Gray's Reef for current and future generations."

The draft plan also provides a framework for the sanctuary to refine its education and outreach programs and strengthen its resource protection activities through research and monitoring. Strategies to address emerging issues, such as the effects of invasive lionfish on sanctuary resources, also are included in the plan.

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.

All comments must be received by Feb. 10, 2014. Written comments should be sent by mail to: George Sedberry, Acting Sanctuary Superintendent, Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary, 10 Ocean Science Circle, Savannah, GA 31411.

Comments may also be submitted electronically via the Federal eRulemaking Portal <http://www.regulations.gov>. In the search window, type NOS-2013-0160, click the “Comment Now!” icon and complete the required fields.

The sanctuary will also hold three public meetings at the following locations where comments can also be submitted:

Jan. 7 - 5:30-7:30 p.m., Pooler Public Library, 216 S. Rogers St., Pooler, Ga.

Jan. 8 - 5:30-7:30 p.m., Statesboro Regional Library, 124 S. Main St., Statesboro, Ga.

Jan. 9 - 5:30-7:30 p.m., Marshes of Glynn Library, 208 Gloucester St., Brunswick, Ga.

The draft management plan and environmental assessment may be downloaded from the sanctuary’s website: <http://graysreef.noaa.gov>.

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