

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
GUANA TOLOMATO MATANZAS NATIONAL ESTUARINE RESEARCH RESERVE
BOUNDARY CHANGE**

The Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve (GTMNERR, or the Reserve) is managed by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection. Originally designated in 1999 and consisting solely of state-owned lands, the GTMNERR currently protects 73,413.53 acres within St. Johns and Flagler counties. An Environmental Assessment was prepared to determine if the proposed incorporation of St. Augustine Inlet/submerged state lands and Marsh View Preserve into the GTMNERR would have significant effects on the quality of the human environment.

The draft EA was published in the Federal Register for public comment from July 10, 2019 through August 10, 2019. No comments were received.

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations state that the determination of significance using an analysis of effects requires examination of both context and intensity, and lists ten criteria for intensity (40 CFR 1508.27). In addition, the Companion Manual for National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Administrative Order 216-6A provides sixteen criteria, the same ten as the CEQ Regulations and six additional, for determining whether the impacts of a proposed action are significant. Each criterion is discussed below with respect to the proposed action and considered individually as well as in combination with the others.

1. Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to cause both beneficial and adverse impacts that overall may result in a significant effect, even if the effect will be beneficial?

The proposed action (preferred alternative) could cause beneficial impacts by the overall improvement in the resource management extended to the additional areas. However, NOAA's Office for Coastal Management (OCM) does not reasonably expect the beneficial impacts to result in significant effects. The proposed boundary expansion would extend the comprehensive conservation and management capacities identified in the NOAA-approved GTMNERR management plan to the new areas, providing a mechanism for implementation of specific restoration, monitoring and research activities for important biological and physical resources. The proposed action is expected to result in minor indirect beneficial effects on the tourism, water quality, and biological resources. Overall, adverse impacts are expected to be unlikely due to the proposed action.

2. Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to significantly affect public health or safety?

The proposed action will not significantly affect public health or safety. The preferred alternative would have minor beneficial impacts on the physical environment including air and water quality. In addition, a minor increase in recreational, educational, and tourist opportunities is expected; which could have an indirect beneficial impact on public health.

3. Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to result in significant impacts to unique characteristics of the geographic area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas?

The proposed action will not have a significant effect on the unique characteristics of the geographic area. No park lands, prime farmlands, wild and scenic rivers, ecologically critical areas, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, wilderness areas, or other such designated areas are in or near the proposed action area. There are two CBRS units and one Otherwise Protected Area that overlap the GTMNERR. No development is envisioned for these areas, but additional environmental consultations will occur if the need arises. The wetlands and their supporting communities present in the expansion areas would experience beneficial impacts of research, monitoring and interagency management efforts extended by the GTMNERR, under the preferred alternative. There are a variety of historic and cultural resources within the GTMNERR and potentially within the expansion areas; however no significant impacts to unique characteristics of the geographic area are expected in the expansion.

4. Are the proposed action's effects on the quality of the human environment likely to be highly controversial?

The proposed action's effects on the human environment are unlikely to be controversial. The GTMNERR's ongoing operations have not been controversial in the past and the proposed action is expected to result in an overall minor beneficial biological effect in the expansion areas. The ecology surrounding GTMNERR is formed across a network of public lands managed by seven agencies including Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, Flagler County, St. Johns River Water Management District, City of St. Augustine, Florida State Parks, the Florida Forest Service and the National Park Service. After several consultations and meetings among these agencies, the preferred alternative was identified as the unanimously supported decision. NOAA submitted a draft Environmental Assessment to the interested parties. NOAA did not receive any comments regarding the proposed boundary expansion during the public comment period.

5. Are the proposed action's effects on the human environment likely to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks?

The effects are not highly uncertain nor do they involve unique or unknown risks. The proposed action involves extension of GTMNERR's administrative management to additional areas. GTMNERR has been operating safely and without any unexpected effects and issues since it was authorized in 1999.

6. Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represent a decision in principle about a future consideration?

The proposed action would not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects. Acquisition and management of environmentally sensitive lands for conservational and recreational purposes is consistent with NOAA's NERRS Program Regulations (15 CFR part 921).

7. Is the proposed action related to other actions that when considered together will have individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts?

Cumulative impacts are addressed in Chapter 4 of the attached EA. The proposed action represents an insignificant impact on the overall ocean business sector-based economy and even less on the much larger coastal business sector-based economy. For the general population and for tourism, ocean- and coastal-based economies, the contribution of the proposed action when combined with reasonably foreseeable military use activities would have an insignificant cumulative impact on the area of interest. No significant cumulative impacts are expected due to the proposed action.

8. Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources?

The proposed action would not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the NRHP or cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. No known NRHP-listed or eligible historic resources are located within the area of potential effects of the proposed action. There are over 60 known cultural and historic resource sites within the current GTMNERR boundary, several of which are on the National Register of Historic Places, including Fort Matanzas National Monument. Additional historic or cultural resources may be located within the expansion areas, but no extensive surveys have been undertaken to date. If NOAA provides funds in the future to support activities that have the potential to cause effect to a historic property, a Section 106 consultation will be undertaken, as required by the NHPA.

9. Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to have a significant impact on endangered or threatened species, or their critical habitat as defined under the Endangered Species Act of 1973?

The proposed action would have no effect on the endangered and threatened species, or their critical habitats as defined under the *Endangered Species Act of 1973*. The proposed action would enable GTMNERR to expand its role to facilitate and conduct research and monitoring, stewardship and education strategies designed to enhance the Reserve's ability to monitor the condition of protected species and to conserve their habitats.

10. Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to threaten a violation of Federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for environmental protection?

The proposed action is not expected to threaten a violation of Federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for environmental protection. As stated in #4, the proposed action is a unanimously supported decision of a network of agencies that manage the area public lands. In addition, should NOAA decide in the future to award funding to GTMNERR, OCM will conduct any additional environmental reviews required by law at that time.

11. Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to adversely affect stocks of marine mammals as defined in the Marine Mammal Protection Act?

The proposed action is not expected to adversely affect stocks of marine mammals as defined in the Marine Mammal Protection Act. The proposed action would extend GTMNERR's research, monitoring, and interagency management efforts in the expansion parcels, and would not adversely affect marine mammals.

12. Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to adversely affect managed fish species?

The proposed action is not reasonably expected to adversely affect managed fish species. Minor beneficial impacts are expected for fish species as a result of GTMNERR's environmental stewardship and resource management extending to additional areas.

13. Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to adversely affect essential fish habitat as defined under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act?

The proposed action is not expected to adversely affect essential fish habitat (EFH) as defined under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. The St. Augustine Inlet and some vegetated and non-vegetated bottoms, live bottoms, and water columns within the boundary expansion area provide the EFH for several species. The proposed action would extend GTMNERR's integrated ecological management approach to the boundary expansion areas, enabling it to maintain its marine habitats as one ecological unit. Therefore, the maintenance and protection of these habitats extended by the proposed action would result in an overall positive effect on the EFH.

14. Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to adversely affect vulnerable marine or coastal ecosystems, including but not limited to, deep coral ecosystems?

The proposed action is not expected to adversely affect vulnerable marine or coastal ecosystems; no deep coral ecosystems are present in the expansion areas. The proposed action focuses on facilitating ecological resource protection in the expansion parcels by extending GTMNERR's long-term research, environmental monitoring, environmental education and resource stewardship. Therefore, the proposed action is expected to result in beneficial effects on the vulnerable marine and coastal ecosystems.

15. Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to adversely affect biodiversity or ecosystem functioning (e.g., benthic productivity, predator-prey relationships, etc.)?

The proposed action is not expected to adversely affect biodiversity or ecosystem functioning. The proposed action would provide a wider range of protection and enhance opportunities for research, monitoring and education in additional areas. This expansion would provide a mechanism for more coordination and integrated ecosystem management that would help GTMNERR attain its mission of conserving natural biodiversity as one ecological unit. Therefore, the proposed action is expected to have beneficial impacts on the biodiversity or ecosystem functioning by providing a wider range of physical, chemical, and biological conservation methodologies that contribute to the diversity of natural processes occurring around the estuary.

16. Can the proposed action reasonably be expected to result in the introduction or spread of a nonindigenous species?

The proposed action is not reasonably expected to result in the introduction or spread of nonindigenous species. The proposed action involves expanding GTMNERR's management boundaries, as appropriate, to increase the network of protected areas; i.e., those areas in which existing Reserve regulations and management actions would apply. Extension of GTMNERR's conservation policies could help in detection of any existing nonindigenous species in the proposed expansion parcels through their monitoring programs and could result in timely control on the spread of such indigenous species.

DETERMINATION

In view of the information presented in this document and the analysis contained in the supporting Environmental Assessment prepared for the Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve Boundary Change, it is hereby determined that the expansion of the Reserve boundary to include the St. Augustine Inlet/Submerged State Lands and Marsh View Preserve areas will not significantly impact the quality of the human environment as described above and in the supporting Environmental Assessment. In addition, all beneficial and adverse impacts of the proposed action have been addressed to reach the conclusion of no significant impacts. Accordingly, preparation of an environmental impact statement for this action is not necessary.

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NOAA's Office for Coastal Management

Date