

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
From: Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management
Date: February 8, 2018
Subject: Regulatory Review – Dry Tortugas Research Natural Area

Purpose:

Present a management overview of Dry Tortugas Research Natural Area (RNA) and provide a summary of the second five-year research report.

Summary:

Located roughly 70 miles west of Key West, the Dry Tortugas National Park region is a valuable place to Florida and its fisheries. The Dry Tortugas region boasts pristine water quality and the highest live coral cover in the state. The region also includes many spawning aggregation sites for important fishery species such as mutton snapper, gray snapper, yellowtail snapper, black grouper, permit, and others. Based on ocean currents and timing, the larvae from these spawning sites help supply the Keys, south Florida, and other portions of the Florida peninsula with new juvenile fish recruits each year.

The RNA is a 46-square mile section of Dry Tortugas National Park where fishing and anchoring are prohibited per National Park Service (NPS) Special Regulations. The RNA was established to protect near-pristine habitats and to provide high quality research opportunities. The RNA was implemented through a management agreement between the NPS and State of Florida (FWC and the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund (Trustees)) in 2005. According to the 2005 management agreement, the NPS is required to report to the Trustees every five years for review and approval of the NPS Special Regulations governing activities in the area. The management agreement also states that FWC is to review the Special Regulations for the RNA, and any amendments to them. FWC and NPS have a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the joint research and evaluation of the RNA. This MOU was signed by the Commission in March of 2013, and will expire in April of 2018.

The RNA has provided multiple benefits to the Dry Tortugas region. The 5-Year Report from 2012 shows an increase in the abundance and size of several reef fish species within the RNA and adjacent areas. In addition, the RNA has contributed to the recovery of important mutton snapper spawning aggregations in the area. Given the positive response of important fisheries species to management measures in the RNA and nearby areas of the Dry Tortugas, staff suggests the Commission continue to support the NPS's Special Regulations and review the issue again in 20 years, or sooner, should the NPS suggest changing the regulations. Staff will continue to monitor fishery populations in the RNA and greater Dry Tortugas region.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommend the Commission continue to concur with the NPS's Special Regulations for the RNA, support FWC's continuing research partnership with the NPS by replacing the MOU with a general management agreement, and increase the time period for review of the RNA regulations to every 20 years (currently every five years).

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

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