

# A Watershed Moment

## Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary Designation Update



**45 years later...** Yes, that's 22,471 in the "Comments Received" box on the left, overwhelmingly in support of the marine sanctuary.

On Jan. 31, the public comment period closed on the Notice of Intent to Initiate Designation of the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary, posted to the Federal Register by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

It was an historic moment. Here's what we mean by "historic:"

In 1977, The National Marine Sanctuary program created a Site Evaluation List for areas that could be considered eligible for designation as national marine sanctuaries. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed Morro Bay and surrounding waters.

In 1983, NOAA assembled an expert panel to assess areas around the U.S. The Morro Bay proposal was suggested again and accepted by NOAA as an NMS candidate site on the Site Evaluation List.

In 1990, SLO County requested that the Morro Bay proposal be expanded to include all of the County's offshore waters and northern Santa Barbara. Supporters of that request included the

Cities of Morro Bay, Grover Beach, San Luis Obispo, Atascadero, Pismo Beach, and Paso Robles, along with San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara Counties, the Pacific Fishery Management Council, Audubon Society, and Sierra Club.

In 1990, HR 5973 (Leon Panetta) was introduced to designate the waters of the central coast of California as a national marine sanctuary, along with a bill to create the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. Only the Monterey Bay bill passed.

In 2000, a review of the management plan for the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary resulted in many public comments received by NOAA asking to expand the sanctuary to the north.

In 2001, a review of the management plan for the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary resulted in many public comments received by NOAA asking to expand the sanctuary to the south.

In 2003, the SLO County Marine Interest Group (MIG) was created as a forum to promote understanding of the marine resources off San Luis Obispo County and the interests of stakeholders, including elected officials, businesspeople, conservationists, fishers, scientists and citizens. At one of the MIG's first meetings, a poll was conducted among members on recommended actions to sustain local marine resources. Nine potential actions were considered, with the top four vote-getters to be the priorities of the group. "Propose extension of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary to the remainder of San Luis Obispo County" and "Propose creation of a new National Marine Sanctuary for the San Luis Obispo County Coast" received more first-place votes combined than any other action, but the moderator declared it a split vote, which put both options below the cut-off point, and both were dropped from further discussion.

In 2006, the update of SLO County's Conservation and Open Space Element included Implementation Strategy BR 7.2.1 Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary: "Work with federal officials and agencies to study the possibility of expansion of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary."

In 2010, the update of SLO County's General Plan included this policy: "Make every effort to secure permanent protection and management of the County's ecologically and economically significant marine resources using the National Marine Sanctuary, National Estuary, or other programs and legislation as vehicles for protection and management."

In 2014, NOAA revived the National Marine Sanctuary selection process, moribund for ten years, and called for local nominations.

In February 2015, the Northern Chumash Tribal Council submitted the nomination for the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary to NOAA.

In October 2015, NOAA accepted the CHNMS nomination.

In October 2020, NOAA renewed the CHNMS nomination.

In November 2021, NOAA announced the designation process for the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary. As a result:

- During initial virtual listening sessions, more than 80 supportive [comments](#) were logged. By the end of the public comment process, the total comments received on the [Federal Register](#) numbered 22,479, with more than 95% in support of the sanctuary.
- The Northern Chumash Tribal Council submitted a [letter](#) on behalf of more than 2,500 individuals and organizations.
- Environment America delivered a [comment](#) with more than 5,000 signatures and a [letter](#) signed by 150 scientists.
- Central Coast businesses submitted a [letter](#) signed by 30 partners.
- Monterey Bay Aquarium delivered a [recommendation letter](#) signed by 75 zoos and aquariums nationwide.
- National Marine Sanctuaries Foundation sent [this letter](#) signed by more than 50 organizations.
- Locally and nationally based marine scientists submitted technical comments.
- Over two dozen local, state, and national nonprofit organizations submitted organizational letters.

(For a sample of the comments, see “All in Favor...” elsewhere in this issue.)

#### **The next steps toward designation:**

- **Sanctuary Proposal** - NOAA prepares draft designation documents including a draft management plan, draft environmental impact statement that analyzes a range of alternatives, proposed regulations and boundaries.
- **Public Review** - The public, agency partners, tribes, and other stakeholders provide input on the draft documents. NOAA considers all input and determines appropriate changes.
- **Designation** - NOAA prepares final designation documents.

For a list of partners, go to <https://chumashsanctuary.org/partners/>

To get updates, sign up on [chumashsanctuary.org](https://chumashsanctuary.org)

For designation process info: <https://chumashsanctuary.org/designation/>

