

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

U.S. Department of the Interior
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge
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News Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Refuge Manager

Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge opens public comment on proposal to extend existing commercial harvesting use 10 years

Background

Commercial fishing (seafood harvesting) is currently scheduled to be phased out on Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge/NWR) on September 30, 2018. During development of the 2008 Merritt Island NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) determined a phase-out of commercial seafood harvesting was necessary to meet Service policy guidelines regarding appropriate and compatible uses. Due to concerns about economic hardship to individual harvesters and their families, the Service approved a 10-year phase-out of commercial fishing. However, during this 10-year phase-out period, permit holders were not adequately notified of the sunset date and the phase-out was not fully implemented as outlined in the CCP.

Proposal

To address the shortcomings related to the phase-out, the Service has been evaluating options to develop a reasonable approach for all involved. To this end, the Service is recommending an extension to the phase out for an additional 10-year period (to September 30, 2028).

Process

In accordance with Service guidelines and National Environmental Policy Act requirements, public involvement is an important factor in the development and review of the proposal to extend the commercial harvesting use another 10 years at Merritt Island NWR. A two-week public comment period will provide the public the opportunity to comment on the proposal at this early stage in the process. The proposed 10-year extension would require revising the existing Compatibility Determination through a categorical exclusion documented in an Environmental Action Statement. Following public comment, the Service will review all comments received and will develop a draft Compatibility Determination and draft Environmental Action Statement which will then be made available to the public for a 30-day public review and comment period. The Service will review all comments submitted and will respond to the substantive comments in an appendix included with the final documents.

Opportunities for public involvement in the development and review of this proposal are:

- August 22-September 8, 2017: just over two-week public comment period to provide early comments on the proposal and
- ~October 2017: 30-day public review and comment period on the draft Compatibility Determination and draft Environmental Action Statement.

A final decision from the Service would be expected in November 2017.

Public Engagement Comments due September 8, 2017

To ensure consideration of public comments at this early stage in the development of the draft Compatibility Determination and draft Environmental Action Statement, the Service requests that comments be submitted by September 8, 2017. Comments may be delivered in writing by:

- Emailing Merritt Island NWR, Commercial Harvesting Proposal at MerrittIsland@fws.gov;
- Mailing Merritt Island NWR, Commercial Harvesting Proposal at PO Box 2683, Titusville, FL 32781-2683;
- Faxing Merritt Island NWR, Commercial Harvesting Proposal at 321-861-1276; or
- Delivering by hand to Merritt Island NWR Headquarters, Commercial Harvesting Proposal, 1963 Refuge HQ Road, Titusville, FL 32780 (5 miles east of Titusville on SR 402).

All comments received will be reviewed and considered in the development of the draft Compatibility Determination and draft Environmental Action Statement.

The National Wildlife Refuge System protects wildlife and wildlife habitat on more than 850 million acres of land and water from the Caribbean to the Pacific, Maine to Alaska, including 7 marine national monuments, 566 national wildlife refuges, and 38 wetland management districts. The Refuge System improves human health, provides outdoor recreation, and supports local economies.

Visit our home page at: <http://www.fws.gov/refuges/>.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov. Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfwssoutheast, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfwssoutheast, watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwssoutheast>.

