

COMMON QUESTIONS & ANSWERS – CONNECTICUT RESERVE NOMINATION PUBLIC MEETING

QUESTION: *What is the National Estuarine Research Reserve System?*

ANSWER: The National Estuarine Research Reserve System (<https://coast.noaa.gov/nerrs/>) is a network of protected areas representative of the various biogeographic regions and estuarine types in the United States. Reserves are established for long-term research, education, and interpretation to promote informed management of the nation's estuaries and coastal habitats.

QUESTION: *What programs and benefits do research reserves offer?*

ANSWER: Reserves apply science and education to improve the management of estuaries. They do this by working with communities to address natural resource management issues, such as nonpoint source pollution, habitat restoration and invasive species, on a local scale. Each reserve brings together local stakeholders, scientists, land management professionals, and educators to understand coastal management issues and generate local, integrated solutions. In addition to collecting and disseminating nationally and locally relevant data, reserves also provide the trainers and educators needed to bring the reserve-generated data and information to local citizens and decision makers. Reserves further benefit their surrounding community by leveraging existing NOAA resources and bringing in additional federal funding that is only available to designated Reserves. Here are some key facts compiled in 2017 by the National Estuarine Research Reserve Association (www.nerra.org), a non-profit Reserve advocacy group:

- Reserves protect more than 1.3 million acres of coastal and estuarine lands that provide flood protection, keep water clean, sustain and create jobs, support fish and wildlife, and offer outdoor recreation.
- Every year, programs offered at reserves attract more than a half a million visitors, and educate approximately 85,000 students and 3,200 teachers.
- Decision makers from more than 2,500 cities and towns and 570 businesses benefit by reserve-based science and technical expertise nationwide each year.
- Reserves leverage additional funding for their surrounding communities. In some states, this can be as much as \$1.5 million.
- Reserve protection and management of estuaries keeps commercial and recreational fishermen successful. The national system contributes billions of dollars to the shellfish and seafood industry in states with a reserve, and tens of billions of dollars in ocean-dependent industries.

QUESTION: *How many reserves are in the national system, and where are they located?*

ANSWER: There are currently 29 reserves across 24 different U.S. states and territories. The most recent addition to the reserve system was in January 2017, when the state of Hawaii designated the only reserve in the Pacific Islands. While all thirty-five coastal and Great Lakes states and U.S. territories are eligible to designate a reserve, Connecticut and Louisiana are the only saltwater coastal states in the country lacking a National Estuarine Research Reserve.

QUESTION: *What is the difference between a National Estuarine Research Reserve and a National Marine Sanctuary?*

ANSWER:

- **Statutory Authority:** Reserves are established under the Coastal Zone Management Act, while Sanctuaries are established under the National Marine Sanctuaries Act.

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- **Ecosystem Components:** Reserves generally consist of state lands and waters and may include uplands, beaches and dry land associated with the estuaries. Sanctuaries may include state and federal waters and the submerged lands under them but do not include any dry land.
- **Management:** Reserves are operated by a state in partnership with NOAA's Office for Coastal Management under a 70-30 federal-state funding match for annual operations support using cooperative agreements. Sanctuaries are managed by NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries under federal protection.
- **Regulations:** While Sanctuaries may establish new limitations on permissible activities within their boundaries (e.g. take limits, harvesting exclusions), the activities within a Reserve are governed by existing state laws and regulations. In short, the establishment of Reserve does not create federal prohibitions that overrule State control of land and water areas. For example, no one would need to obtain a new permit to fish within a site at the reserve; existing state-wide licenses and permits issued by CT DEEP would suffice.

Although the systems do defer in their underlying legislation and management structure, they serve similar goals of place-based conservation, fostering science-based management, and working on the ground with local communities. Both housed within NOAA's National Ocean Service, these programs are increasingly working together to share lessons across the two systems.

QUESTION: *What is the difference between the nomination and designation of a National Estuarine Research Reserve?*

ANSWER: Designation officially recognizes the site as a reserve in the National Estuarine Research Reserve System, while nomination simply starts the formal process to develop the information necessary for NOAA to make its decision regarding whether to designate this site as part of the System. Nomination of a reserve requires the governor of a state or territory submit a nomination of a proposed site to NOAA for consideration. The nomination package must include a detailed site selection process and a description of the public participation process used to support site selection. Designation of a reserve is only considered after an environmental review is completed under the National Environmental Protection Act, and a management plan is developed for the proposed site.

QUESTION: *Why is Connecticut nominating a reserve?*

ANSWER: Connecticut is one of only two salt-water states in the nation without a designated Reserve. A Connecticut-based Reserve could complement and extend the scientific, educational, and stewardship activities and needs of programs like the EPA National Estuary Program (Long Island Sound Study), the Connecticut Coastal Management Program, the Connecticut Sea Grant office, and various academic institutions through the addition of funding, resources, and expertise. Additionally, it could enable new directions and initiatives by leveraging nation-wide programs. The health of the Sound's ecosystem and the many human uses that depend on it would benefit from establishing a Reserve.

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QUESTION: *Will the state have to purchase land for a Connecticut reserve?*

ANSWER: No. Connecticut is considering sites from existing publicly owned lands consisting of state owned property and adjacent public trust waters. Municipal and non-profit property may be considered, and could be part of a reserve through a cooperative agreement with the State.

QUESTION: *Will a new reserve involve NOAA taking land from the State?*

ANSWER: NOAA does not own or manage the land within a reserve, nor does the designation of a reserve add new state or federal regulations. Memoranda of Agreement are used to articulate roles and responsibilities between relevant partners and landowners in the state, and NOAA.

QUESTION: *If the reserve site is designated, will there be restrictions to the existing cultural, recreational or commercial activities that occur in the area?*

ANSWER: No. Designation of a research reserve site does not preclude existing uses and does not result in the total preservation of the area. Each reserve develops a management plan which takes into consideration the beneficial consumptive (resource harvesting such as hunting, fishing, shellfishing) and non-consumptive uses (recreational activities such as hiking, birdwatching, biking) and the compatibility with adjacent land uses.

QUESTION: *Will a reserve bring more federal rules and regulations?*

ANSWER: No. Reserve designation does not add any new regulations. As part of the site designation process, NOAA will examine whether a proposed site is adequately protected for long-term research and education by existing state authorities. There are no new federal regulations imposed as a result of reserve designation.

QUESTION: *What is the process for nominating a reserve in Connecticut?*

ANSWER: The process for nominating a National Estuarine Research Reserve involves several steps and many individuals and organizations. Reserves are based on partnerships, with NOAA serving as the lead federal partner. The Connecticut designation process is being led at the state level by the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (CTDEEP), working closely with the University of Connecticut and Connecticut Sea Grant. These partners formed several teams to support the designation process, which researched various sites to consider for nomination and then scored the sites based on identified criteria. After seeking input from affected landowners on the highest ranking sites, CTDEEP identified a final site and is coordinating a site selection package to submit to NOAA for review.

QUESTION: *Who is funding the nomination process?*

ANSWER: Once NOAA determines that it can accept a new nomination, the lead state agency may submit an application to NOAA for predesignation assistance funding (70 federal/30 state match requirement). A state is eligible for a total of \$100,000 in federal funds for predesignation activities, which include site selection, a limited basic characterization of the physical, chemical, and biological characteristics of the site, preparation of the required management plan, and providing data and information to NOAA for development of the draft

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and final Environmental Impact Statements. To date, Connecticut has received \$48,000 of predesignation assistance. The state is using these funds to finalize its site selection process.

QUESTION: *Is there funding for the reserve program in the FY 2019 President's Budget?*

ANSWER: No, the FY 2019 President's Budget does not include funding for the National Estuarine Research Reserve System. However, the reserve system continues to receive strong Congressional support. The FY 2019 House mark increased funding to \$27 million, and the Senate FY 2019 mark increased funding to \$27.5 million.

QUESTION: *What criteria must a proposed site meet to be eligible to nominated as a research reserve?*

ANSWER: Reserve sites are chosen to reflect regional variations and ecosystem types, termed "biogeographic regions," and unique estuarine habitat features within each biogeographic region. NOAA will give priority consideration to designation proposals that establish a reserve in a biogeographic region or sub-region that is not currently represented by the reserve system or that incorporates unique habitat types that are not represented by the system. NOAA would also evaluate the site based on whether it would be adequately protected for long-term research, education, and stewardship.

QUESTION: *Where is the proposed reserve site located in Connecticut, and what are the proposed boundaries?*

ANSWER: The proposed reserve site is comprised of the following state-owned properties: Lord Cove Wildlife Management Area; Great Island Wildlife Management Area; Bluff Point State Park, Coastal Reserve and Natural Area Preserve; Haley Farm State Park; and the public trust portions of waterbodies defined by:

- (a) Long Island Sound ranging approximately west to east from the mouth of the Connecticut River to Mason's Island and north to south waterward of the mean high water shoreline to just shy of the Connecticut state boundary in Long Island Sound;
- (b) the area waterward of the mean high shoreline of the lower Thames River from approximately the Gold Star Bridge south to the area described in (a);
- (c) the area waterward of the mean high shoreline of the lower Connecticut River from approximately Lord Cove south to the area described in (a).

The proposed land and water boundaries are subject to input from the public and other stakeholders, and will be refined during the nomination and DEIS/DMP development phases.

QUESTION: *How can I learn more about this site and the nomination process?*

ANSWER: The state, in conjunction with NOAA, will hold a public meeting in the vicinity of the site being considered. The meeting will be publicized in a local newspaper and in the Federal Register at least fifteen (15) days before being held. More information on the Connecticut nomination process can be found on CTDEEP's website: www.ct.gov/deep/nerr

QUESTION: *If I am unable to attend the public meeting, can I submit a written comment on the proposed Reserve nomination?*

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ANSWER: Written statements by interested persons and organizations on the proposed site may be sent to Kevin O'Brien, Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection - Land & Water Resources Division, 79 Elm Street, Hartford, CT 06106-5127 or to: kevin.obrien@ct.gov. The deadline is no later than seven (7) days following the public meeting. All comments received will be considered by the State in formally nominating a site to NOAA.

QUESTION: *After the meeting, what are the next steps in the nomination process?*

ANSWER: After the meeting, the state would be expected to submit final site-selection documents. NOAA may request additional information or suggest changes to the nomination. The governor would submit to the NOAA Administrator a nomination letter identifying the proposed site and confirming the lead state agency. NOAA then reviews the site-selection document and sends a letter to the governor accepting or rejecting the nomination.

QUESTION: *If NOAA accepts the state's nomination, when could a reserve be designated?*

ANSWER: Should NOAA accept the State's nomination, it would kick off NOAA's development of an environmental impact statement to consider the State's recommended site and other options; the State's development of a draft Management Plan for NOAA's review; and additional public meetings and opportunities for public comment. This could take 12 to 24-months.

QUESTION: *Does the NERR designation process relate to the Connecticut Blue Plan?*

ANSWER: The Connecticut "Blue Plan" (www.ct.gov/deep/lisblueplan) is a spatial plan to guide future use of Long Island Sound's waters and submerged lands, driven by state legislation that called on the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection to inventory the Sound's natural resources and uses. Though separate processes, it is anticipated that the certain elements of Blue Plan and a reserve management plan could potentially benefit from and inform each other.