

President Obama plans to create world's largest marine protected area

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Washington: US President Barack Obama plans to create world's largest marine protected area by expanding a national monument off the coast of Hawaii, according to The White House.

President Obama

The Hawaii monument was originally created by President George W. Bush in 2006 which will quadruple after President Obama issues the proclamation.

The American President will travel to the monument next week to mark the designation. He is also expected to stress on the need for protecting public lands and waters from climate change.

The Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument will contain some 1.5 million square kilometers, more than twice the size of Texas.

The designation bans commercial fishing and any new mining, as is the case within the existing monument. Recreational fishing will be allowed through a permit, as will be scientific research and the removal of fish and other resources for Native Hawaiian cultural practices. Some fishing groups have voiced concerns about what an expansion of the marine national monument would mean for their industry.

Sean Martin, the president of the Hawaii Longline Association, said he was "disappointed" by Hawaii Gov. David Ige's decision to support expanding the monument. He said the monument's expansion would be based on political and not scientific reasons.

Hawaii's longline fishing fleet supplies a large portion of the fresh tuna and other fish consumed in Hawaii. Martin has previously estimated the fleet catches about 900,000 kilograms of fish annually from the proposed expansion area.

The White House is describing the expansion as helping to protect more than 7,000 species and improving the resiliency of an ecosystem dealing with ocean acidification and warming. A fact sheet previewing the announcement states that the expanded area is considered a sacred place for Native Hawaiians.

Shipwrecks and downed aircraft from the Battle of Midway in World War II dot the expansion area. The battle marked a major shift in the war. Obama will travel to the Midway Atoll to discuss the expansion.

With the announcement, Obama will have created or expanded 26 national monuments. The administration said Obama has protected more acreage through national monument designations than any other president.

The White House said the expansion is a response to a proposal from Democratic Sen. Brian Schatz and prominent Native Hawaiian leaders. The federal government will also give Hawaii's Department of Natural Resources and Office of Hawaiian Affairs a greater role in managing the monument, an arrangement requested by Schatz and Gov. David Ige.

- (With AP inputs)