

Request for Proposals (RFP) for An Interpretive Plan for the National Marine Sanctuary System

Funding Opportunity Overview

[National Marine Sanctuary Foundation](#), in cooperation with NOAA's [Office of National Marine Sanctuaries](#), is soliciting bids for creation of a Master Interpretive Plan for the National Marine Sanctuary System.

Request for Proposals

Contract ceiling amount: \$125,000

The objective of the contract is to create an Interpretive Plan for the National Marine Sanctuary System. This plan will be a framework for creating more uniform interpretation across the National Marine Sanctuary System, including at visitor centers and partner locations.

Implementation Period

April 15, 2026 to April 1, 2027
The contract may be completed earlier

Application Package Due

Friday, March 13, 2026
11:59 PM Eastern Standard Time

BACKGROUND

The National Marine Sanctuary Foundation is the official non-profit partner of NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, supporting its system of 18 marine environments from Massachusetts to American Samoa and the Great Lakes to the Florida Keys. We protect these iconic places, care for marine wildlife and habitats, honor our nation's maritime history and cultural traditions, and promote the enjoyment of these public waters through a combination of coalition-building, private fundraising and federal support.

In a quarter of a century, we've expanded and deepened people's connections and access to our ocean, coasts, and Great Lakes, and built partnerships with coastal communities and businesses alongside the over 629,000 square miles of public waters that belong to all Americans.



OVERVIEW OF FUNDING OPPORTUNITY

Goal

The goal of this project is to create a Master Interpretive Plan for NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS). This plan will serve as a guiding document in interpreting the National Marine Sanctuary System, and help direct how ONMS tells its stories to the public most effectively. It will help determine what ONMS wants the public to learn, feel, and do when they engage with national marine sanctuary materials.

Important Information

- National marine sanctuaries do not have gates or entrance points. Visitor centers and exhibits and signs at partner locations are the best way to connect with the public and provide interpretation about the National Marine Sanctuary System.
- ONMS operates 12 visitor centers around the country, serving as gateways to sanctuary communities, and providing interpretation to help tell the story of the National Marine Sanctuary System. Each visitor center focuses on the national marine sanctuary they are affiliated with, as well as how that site connects to the system as a whole.
- The National Marine Sanctuary System also provides interpretive information and exhibits to partners for their facilities, helping to increase the national marine sanctuary audience.
- The National Marine Sanctuary System also uses other methods to provide interpretation to the public, such as videos, stories, and web content.

TIMELINE

The timeline of project activities should be clearly addressed in the applicant's proposal. Project proposals that do not address whether work can be completed within the noted timeline will not be rated as highly in the review process. The contract's period of performance is April 15, 2026 to April 1, 2027. **An accelerated timeline is preferable, and there is no ability for a significant extension.**

ELIGIBILITY

Applicants must have a proven track record of doing similar projects in scope and scale, and must have the technical ability to complete the project within the provided budget.

By submitting an offer in response to this RFP, the offeror certifies that it and its principal officers are not debarred, suspended, or otherwise considered ineligible for an award by the U.S. Government. The Foundation will not award a contract to any firm that is debarred, suspended, or considered to be ineligible by the U.S. Government.

HOW TO APPLY

Application packages should be submitted by 11:59 PM Eastern Standard Time on Friday, March 13, 2026. Please submit your application package to the Foundation through C-STAAAR – the Foundation's Collaborative System for Tracking Activities, Awards, and Reporting – using the following link: <https://marinesanctuary.smartsimple.com/>.

Step 1: You will need to register your organization to begin your application. You can find registration steps and instructions [here](#).



Step 2: Once you have set up your Organization Profile, navigate to the Applicant Home page. Scroll down and click “View Active Contract RFPs” to find the RFP titled “An Interpretive Plan for the National Marine Sanctuary System” opportunity. Click “Apply to RFP” to see the application page. **Be sure to click the blue "Start Application" button at the bottom of the page before beginning your application.**

Step 3: Complete the application and submit by clicking the green “Submit” button at the bottom of the page. Please direct all questions to support@marinesanctuary.org with the email subject line: “RFP QUESTION for An Interpretive Plan for the National Marine Sanctuary System: [Your Organization Name].”

We will be reviewing applications in March, and we will be reaching out for next steps by early April.

SCOPE OF WORK

The successful candidate will work with ONMS staff to develop a Master Interpretive Plan for the National Marine Sanctuary System, to communicate about the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries from a national level. To develop this plan, the selected contractor will produce the following deliverables:

- Conduct a focus workshop session with ONMS staff to determine the main interpretive theme and sub-themes to communicate about the National Marine Sanctuary System.
- Work with ONMS staff to conduct an inventory and analysis of interpretive resources for the National Marine Sanctuary System.
- Provide a draft interpretive plan for review.
- Complete a Master Interpretive Plan document. The final plan should be provided in PDF and editable formats.

Budget Requirements

Submitted proposal budgets cannot exceed \$125,000.

All submitted budgets must include the following:

- Travel cost, if required
- Personnel cost; and
- Other relevant costs. However, all line items need a justification.

Past Performance & Technical Requirements

Please provide a sample of a past interpretive plan, visitor experience plan, master exhibit plan, or equivalent plan. These can be uploaded as attachments.

Please provide 3–4 references with names, organizations, titles, phone numbers, and email addresses. This can be uploaded as an attachment.

Please provide the background and experience of the technical staff who will be working on this project.

Desired Capabilities (not required)

- Previous work on similar place-based or system-wide interpretation.

- Experience creating an Interpretive Plan or a similar tool that creates a seamless and effective visitor experience.

REVIEW PROCESS

Evaluation Criteria

Evaluation Criteria	Sub-Questions	Score	Scoring for this criterion will be assessed on how well proposals:
PAST PERFORMANCE	Does the proposal include relevant samples of past work?	45	Does the proposal show experience working on an interpretive plan, visitor experience plan, master exhibit plan, or equivalent plan? Does the past experience have relevance to this RFP? Considerations include work with multiple partners and communities, experience with system-wide interpretation, or work with place-based interpretation.
TECHNICAL SKILLS AND PROJECT FEASIBILITY	Does the proposal clearly outline a plan to address the scope of work? Is the proposal feasible in the period of performance timeframe? Is a descriptive timeline included? Do the applicant and any project partners have the ability and expertise (or the potential) to conduct the scope and scale of the proposed work?	45	Demonstrate a thorough level of planning that will allow the applicant to begin the project promptly and complete the project within the period of the performance timeline. Considerations include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are milestones identified in the project timeline that align with project goals and objectives? • Are roles clearly identified? • Do activities take place during the implementation period?
PROJECT COSTS	Is the budget realistic? Does the budget description sufficiently explain how each item in the budget table supports project activities?	10	Provide a detailed list of specific items, tools, materials, etc., and associated costs for each expense category. Considerations include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are explanations provided for how each item in the budget table supports project activities? • Are budgeted items prioritized that directly support projects and/or workforce development and capacity-building opportunities (program staff salary, fringe, and indirect budget requests are relatively small fractions of the total budget)?
Total Points	100		

APPLICATION LOGISTICS

Timeline

Expected Timeline (broken down by month)	2026												2027			
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	
Request for Proposals Submission Open All proposals must be submitted by Friday, March 13, 2026																
Technical review of proposals Proposals will be reviewed and scored during March.																
Notification, Contracting All applicants will be notified of proposal status in April. Proposals may be invited into a negotiation round. Contracting will be performed in April.																
Period of Performance April 15, 2026 to April 1, 2027																

TERMS & CONDITIONS

This is a Request for Proposals (RFP) only. Issuance of this RFP does not in any way obligate the Foundation to make an award or pay for costs incurred by potential offerors in the preparation and submission of an offer. In addition:

- (a) The Foundation may cancel RFP and not award;
- (b) The Foundation may reject any or all responses received;
- (c) Issuance of RFP does not constitute award commitment by The Foundation;
- (d) The Foundation reserves the right to disqualify any offer based on offeror failure to follow RFP instructions;
- (e) The Foundation will not compensate offerors for a response to RFP;
- (f) The Foundation reserves the right to issue an award based on an initial evaluation of offers without further discussion;
- (g) The Foundation may negotiate with short-listed offerors for their best and final offer;
- (h) The Foundation reserves the right to order additional quantities or units with the selected offer or;
- (i) The Foundation may reissue the solicitation or issue formal amendments revising the original RFP specifications and evaluation criteria before or after receipt of proposals;
- (j) The Foundation may modify the specifications without issuing a formal notice to all offerors when the revisions are immaterial to the scope of the RFP;
- (k) The Foundation may choose to award only part of the activities in the RFP or issue multiple awards based on multiple RFP activities; and
- (l) The Foundation reserves the right to waive minor proposal deficiencies that can be corrected prior to award determination to promote competition.