NATIONAL VALIDATION REPORT

Biodiversity Protection Zones Expansion

Milestone 6 of the Conservation Funding Agreement

National Validation Session

5 June 2026 | BW Plus Belize Biltmore Plaza, Belize City



BW Plus Biltmore Plaza Belize
5th June 2026
9:30 am - 12:00 pm

Belize Sustainable Ocean Plan

Prepared by the Marine Spatial Planning Unit
Coastal Zone Management Authority and Institute

July 2026

Document purpose and status

This report documents and analyses the stakeholder feedback recorded during the National Biodiversity Protection Zone (BPZ) Validation Session held on 5 June 2026. It consolidates the validation discussion with the findings of the April 2026 community consultations and the technical information presented at the national session.

> **Overall validation outcome:** No outright objection to the proposed areas was documented at the national validation session. Support was nevertheless conditional on protecting fishing livelihoods, improving transparency and representation, strengthening management and enforcement, and avoiding expansion beyond the agreed national target without a new public and legal process.

The report is intended to guide final technical refinement, government decision-making, communication with stakeholders, and early implementation planning. It does not replace the official spatial datasets, legal instruments, management plans, attendance register, audio record, or any formal government decision.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
BFiD	Belize Fisheries Department
BPZ	Biodiversity Protection Zone
BSOP	Belize Sustainable Ocean Plan
CFA	Conservation Funding Agreement
CZMAI	Coastal Zone Management Authority and Institute
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
MPA	Marine Protected Area
MSP	Marine Spatial Planning/Plan
OUS	Ocean Use Survey
RBB / PfP	Resilient Bold Belize / Project Finance for Permanence

Executive Summary

Belize is advancing Milestone 6 of the Conservation Funding Agreement, which requires the completion and enactment of the Belize Sustainable Ocean Plan and the designation of BPZs covering 30% of Belize's ocean, or the percentage stated in the Marine Spatial Plan (MSP), by 4 November 2026. The April 2026 consultation process presented the remaining 4.95% proposed for protection after achievement of 25.05% under Milestone 4. A national validation session was subsequently held on 5 June 2026.

The proposal presented at validation was informed by ecological and social design criteria and Marxan decision-support analysis. The principal addition is a deep-sea area east of Lighthouse Reef Atoll extending into the EEZ, adjusted in response to fishers' input to avoid the more actively used waters inward of the 1,000-metre contour. The designation also retains the proposed redesignation or "swap" within the Sapodilla Cayes area to restore access to a traditional fishing area while offsetting the protection offshore.

Headline findings

- No outright objection to the proposed areas was documented. Participants explicitly observed that fishers were not against protection and generally supported measures that conserve Belize's natural resources.
- Support was conditional. Stakeholders repeatedly linked acceptance to a ceiling around the national 30% target, protection of traditional and subsistence users, transparent criteria, meaningful fisher representation, and tangible social and livelihood measures.
- The adjustment made for deep-sea fishing use was welcomed. The validation discussion reinforced the need to preserve access where use has been identified and to communicate the final coordinates and permitted activities clearly.
- The Sapodilla Cayes redesignation remained acceptable in the validation record. No new objection to the swap was documented, and the broader consultation record showed appreciation that earlier concerns about traditional access had been addressed.
- The dominant concerns were about implementation and ocean governance rather than the specific proposed boundaries: weak enforcement, dredging and mangrove loss, inequitable access to funding, high operating costs, fisher representation, and delays in management planning.
- Participants asked why distant deep-sea areas should be prioritised while heavily stressed coastal habitats remain degraded. This is best addressed through clearer explanation of representativeness and connectivity, alongside a separate response to coastal habitat and development pressures.

Consensus statement

Proposed consensus: Stakeholders participating in the national validation did not reject the adjusted Milestone 6 BPZ proposal and demonstrated broad, conditional support for proceeding. Consensus is strongest where the final design avoids displacement of identified users, maintains the stated national protection target, clearly defines High and Medium BPZ rules, provides accessible maps and coordinates, and is followed by enforceable management plans developed with fishers and affected communities.

Priority recommendations

1. Formally record the validation as conditional support rather than unconditional approval.
2. Complete a final spatial and percentage quality check, including confirmation of the slight total above 30% shown in the presentation and the treatment of rounding.
3. Publish a plain-language technical note explaining the deep-sea ecological rationale, Marxan inputs, the 1,000-metre contour adjustment, High and Medium BPZ classifications, permitted activities, and expected effects on fishers.
4. Begin management planning immediately after designation and bring forward the operational timetable where feasible, with fisher participation and interim enforcement arrangements.
5. Establish a transparent fisher representation mechanism and a documented process for selecting community or association representatives.
6. Separate BPZ designation decisions from wider livelihood-finance programmes, while maintaining a public action tracker for linked concerns such as fuel, ice, equipment, training, lionfish markets, sargassum and community grants.
7. Coordinate an inter-agency response to dredging, mangrove clearing, overwater structures, pollution, illegal fishing and maritime safety concerns.

1. Background and Context

The Belize Sustainable Ocean Plan is the national marine spatial planning process for organising ocean uses, reducing conflict, supporting sustainable blue economy sectors, and conserving marine and coastal biodiversity. Under Milestone 4, Belize expanded its BPZ network to 25.05% of national ocean space. Milestone 6 advances the network toward the national commitment while also requiring completion and enactment of the MSP.

From April to May 2026, CZMAI and BFiD conducted community consultations on the proposed areas. The earlier report recorded eleven sessions representing twenty-seven coastal communities and approximately 822 stakeholders. That process found general acceptance of the deep-sea proposal, subject to engagement with deep-sea fishers and adjustment of the boundary to avoid active fishing areas. It also recorded support for the Sapodilla Cayes redesignation in the south and strong opposition to protection beyond the national target.

The national validation session brought together fishers, association and cooperative representatives, community voices, technical officers and partner organisations to review the revised proposal, the design criteria and ecological rationale, and the implications of the proposed High and Medium BPZ configuration.

2. Validation Objectives

- Present the revised Milestone 6 BPZ proposal and the adjustments made following community consultations.
- Explain the ecological and social design criteria, including EEZ representation, deep-sea representation, connectivity, seamounts and livelihood-use information.
- Validate whether the proposed areas were broadly acceptable to stakeholders and identify any remaining concerns.
- Clarify issues relating to High and Medium BPZ classifications, management planning and the national protection target.
- Document recommendations for finalisation and implementation of the proposed areas.

3. Methodology and Evidence Base

This report applies a qualitative thematic analysis to the written validation notes. Individual contributions were coded into: (i) direct feedback on the proposed areas or classifications; (ii) conditions attached to support; (iii) implementation and management issues; and (iv) wider sectoral or social issues requiring referral. Recurring points were then grouped into themes and compared with the April 2026 community consultation findings and the technical information in the validation presentation.

Evidence reviewed

Source	Use in this report
BPZ validation notes on feedback	Primary record of stakeholder comments and responses at the 5 June session.
BPZs Validation Presentation - Milestone 6	Technical proposal, design criteria, deep-sea representation, maps, percentages and session agenda.
Draft BPZ Community Consultation Report, May 2026	Baseline findings, community-level positions, user identification and recommended boundary adjustment.

4. Overview of the Proposal Presented

The proposal was developed using design criteria intended to improve ecological representation while reducing livelihood displacement. The criteria presented included the selection of approximately 4% of ocean space within the EEZ; representation of waters deeper than 200 meters; connectivity of approximately 20–50 kilometers from existing MPAs; protection of seamount features; and use of Ocean Use Survey information as a livelihood cost layer.

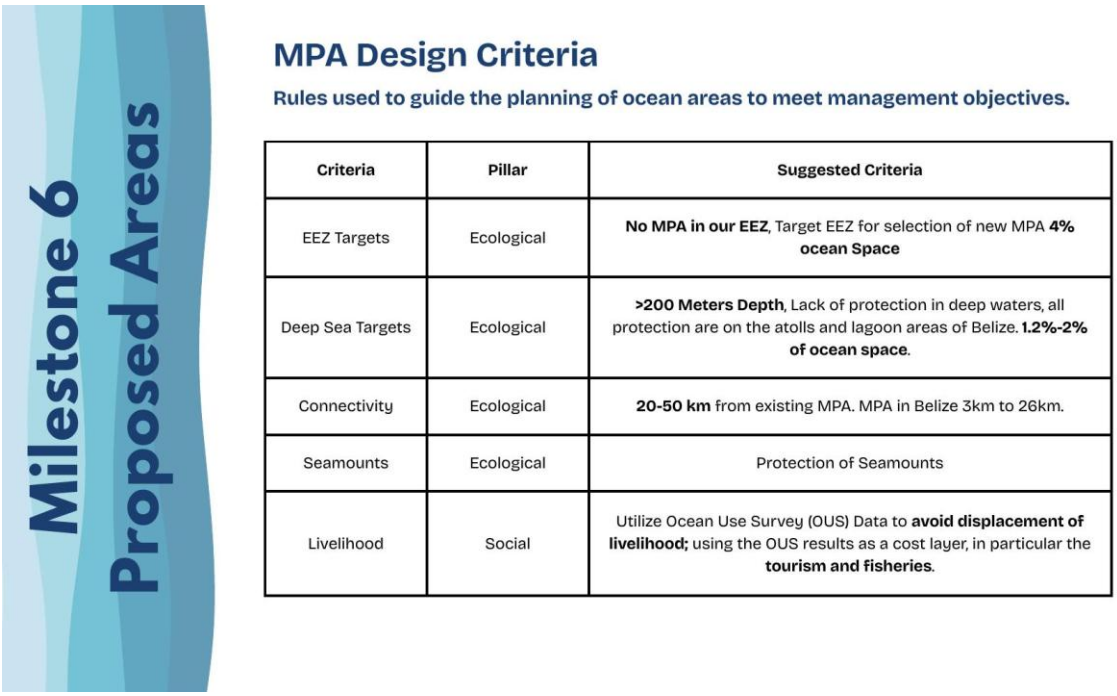


Figure 1. MPA design criteria presented during the national validation session. Source: CZMAI validation presentation, 5 June 2026.

4.1 Proposed deep-sea designation east of Lighthouse Reef Atoll

The principal proposed addition lies east of Lighthouse Reef Atoll and extends into Belize's EEZ. The presentation explained that deep-sea features provide distinct habitats, support nutrient movement and food webs, offer breeding or stopover areas for migratory species, and may function as climate refuges. Marxan was used to identify areas that repeatedly met the design criteria at comparatively low livelihood cost.

Following the April consultations and targeted engagement with deep-sea fishers, the boundary was adjusted so that actively used waters nearer Lighthouse Reef—described in the consultation report as areas inward of the 1,000-metre contour—would remain accessible.

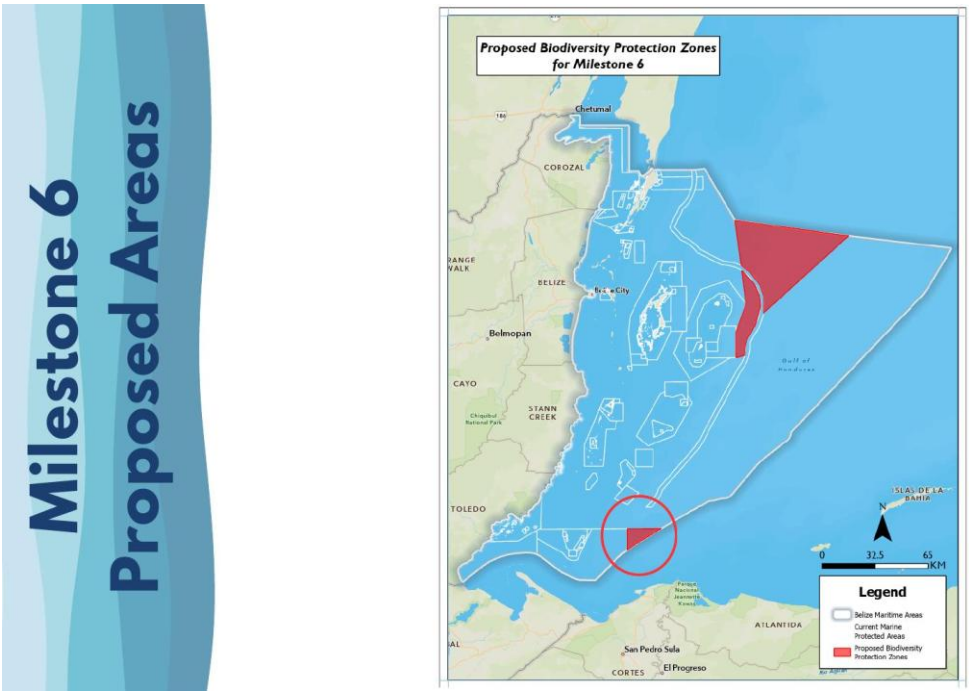


Figure 2. Proposed deep-sea Biodiversity Protection Zone presented at validation. The official GIS dataset remains the authoritative source for boundaries.

4.2 Sapodilla Cayes redesignation

The designation also incorporated the redesignation of a portion of the existing full-protection zone in the Sapodilla Cayes area to Medium BPZ status, with equivalent protection offset farther offshore. The adjustment responds to earlier fisher concerns and is intended to restore access to traditional fishing grounds without reducing the overall protected area commitment.

4.3 Proposed national configuration

The validation presentation displayed a proposed configuration of 16.349% High BPZ and 13.654% Medium BPZ, totaling 30.003%. Participants queried the slight amount above 30%. The final legal and technical designation should clearly state whether this difference is caused by rounding, mapping precision or the final geometry.

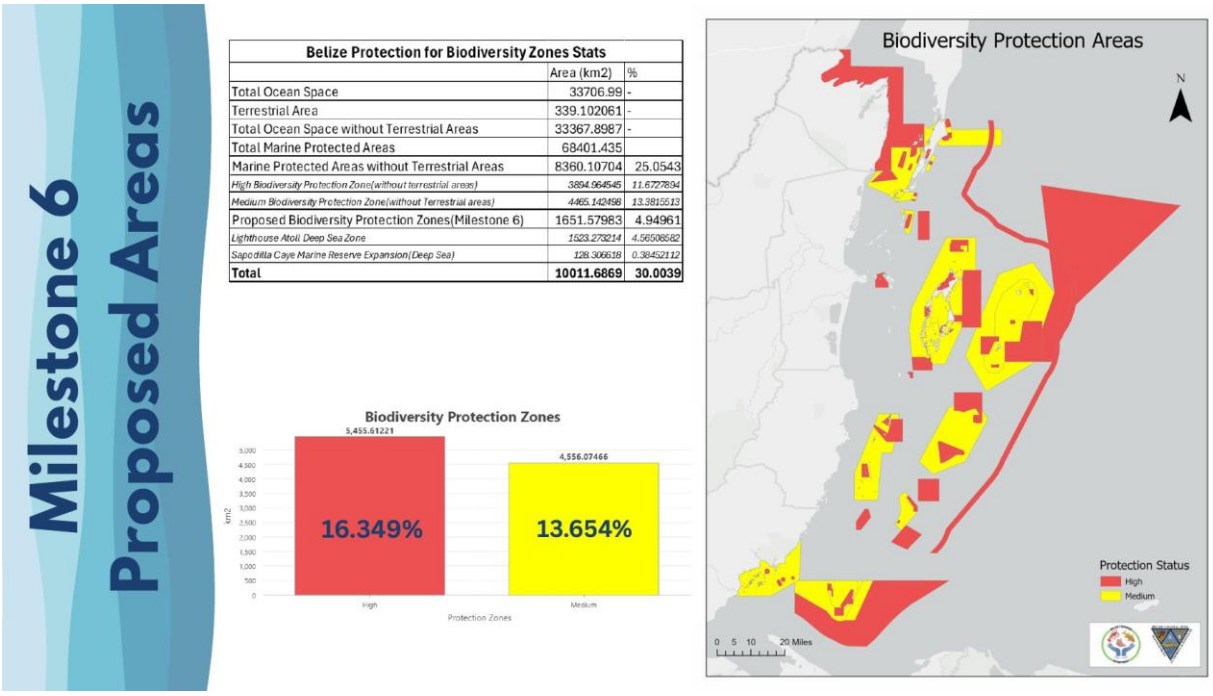


Figure 3. High and Medium BPZ configuration presented during validation. Percentages require final technical verification before gazettal.

5. Validation Findings

5.1 Overall validation position

The national discussion did not record an outright rejection of either proposed area. One participant summarised the position by noting that fishers were not against the proposal and supported protection of natural resources, while emphasising socioeconomic needs, stressed coastal zones and fisher representation. Contributions from Sarteneja and Hopkins similarly indicated acceptance of the current proposal, coupled with the clear expectation that no additional ocean space would be taken beyond the present commitment.

The resulting position is best described as broad but conditional support. Stakeholders' willingness to proceed was tied to safeguards and to government action on wider issues that affect confidence in marine conservation.

Validation dimension	Assessment	Evidence-based interpretation
Adjusted deep-sea area	Broad conditional support	No outright objection recorded; adjustment for identified users welcomed; questions remain on science, use rules and benefits.
Sapodilla Cayes swap	Accepted / no new objection recorded	Earlier southern concerns were addressed; the validation notes do not record renewed opposition.
High / Medium split	Requires clarification	Participants requested criteria, legal meaning and assurance for traditional and subsistence users.
National target	Strong condition	Repeated request for no further expansion beyond the agreed target; slight numerical exceedance queried.
Implementation readiness	Material concern	Management plans, enforcement, representation and livelihood measures were seen as necessary for legitimacy.

5.2 What stakeholders validated

- The revised proposal is preferable where it avoids displacement of known deep-sea fishing use.
- Protection of ecologically important ocean areas is supported in principle.
- The national process should use best available science and stakeholder-use information rather than arbitrary area selection.
- Traditional, subsistence and commercial fishing interests must be considered in classification and management rules.
- Management arrangements should be developed with fishers and communicated before restrictions are operationalised.

5.3 Conditions attached to validation

- No automatic expansion beyond the national target after Milestone 6.
- Accessible written explanation of the scientific basis, maps, coordinates and permitted uses.
- Clear distinction between High and Medium BPZs and how each affects fishing activities.
- Faster preparation of management plans and credible enforcement of both existing and new BPZs.
- Direct and democratically legitimate fisher participation in decisions and funding structures.
- Fair access to livelihood support, finance and benefits linked to conservation commitments.

5.4 Matters not resolved by the validation

- The final verified percentage and legal description of the BPZ network.
- The precise management rules, interim controls and operational start date for each new zone.
- The mechanism for selecting fisher representatives and ensuring coverage of all communities and associations.
- The programme and eligibility rules for livelihood finance, fuel or equipment support, community grants and other social measures.
- The inter-agency response to dredging, mangrove loss, overwater development, pollution, sargassum and maritime security.

6. Thematic Analysis of Stakeholder Feedback

6.1 Protection target, boundaries and future expansion

Stakeholders broadly recognised Belize's existing commitment, but repeatedly asked for assurance that additional areas would not be designated beyond the present target. Concern was expressed about what might happen in future decades and whether the present process could lead to continuing loss of fishing space. The displayed total of 30.003% heightened this concern.

Implication for the BSOP process

- Confirm the final area and percentage using the authoritative GIS layer.
- Explain in writing how rounding and the CFA clause are being interpreted.
- State that any future change would require its own evidence, legal authority and stakeholder process.

6.2 Scientific rationale and local knowledge

Participants questioned the evidence for protecting deep-sea areas when Belize has limited deep-sea data and visibly degraded nearshore habitats. They asked what is being protected, how the sites were selected and whether knowledge from fishers was given adequate weight. The presentation provided a rationale based on representativeness, connectivity, deep-sea features, Marxan and OUS data, but the discussion showed that this explanation needs to be more accessible.

Implication for the BSOP process

- Publish a short technical brief and frequently asked questions.
- Show how fisher-use data changed the boundary.
- Create a mechanism for fisher-scientists and local ecological knowledge to inform monitoring.

6.3 Enforcement and management effectiveness

A consistent concern—also prominent in the April consultations—was that existing MPAs are not adequately enforced. Participants questioned the value of adding zones without management plans, patrol capacity, demarcation and rules. Dredging, illegal fishing, incursions, jet skis and damaging development were cited as examples of weak control.

Implication for the BSOP process

- Prepare interim enforcement and communication arrangements before designation becomes operational.
- Accelerate management plans and include local users in their preparation.
- Publish coordinates, zone rules and demarcation plans.

6.4 Coastal habitat degradation and development

Dredging, mangrove clearing, overwater structures, pollution and degradation of juvenile fish and lobster habitat were among the most strongly expressed concerns. Stakeholders from San Pedro and other communities argued that heavily stressed nearshore areas require urgent protection and enforcement, not only distant deep-sea designations.

Implication for the BSOP process

- Refer site-specific complaints to the competent permitting and enforcement bodies.

- Integrate priority stress zones into BSOP implementation and cumulative-effects management.
- Report publicly on actions taken, even when the matter falls outside BPZ designation.

6.5 Fisheries livelihoods and cost of participation

Fuel, ice, vessel repair, equipment, inflation, travel distance, seasonal closures and the cost of attending consultations were repeatedly raised. Stakeholders linked conservation legitimacy to whether fishers can maintain viable livelihoods and whether costs and benefits are fairly shared.

Implication for the BSOP process

- Undertake a targeted socioeconomic impact and needs assessment.
- Coordinate feasible fuel, ice, equipment and finance interventions with relevant agencies and funds.
- Budget participation support proportionately and transparently.

6.6 Benefit-sharing, finance and accountability

Participants asked how Blue Bond and related funds benefit fishers and communities. Concerns included complexity of grant access, unequal geographic coverage, association registration costs, perceived imbalance between organisations and fishers, and accountability for funding. Officials clarified that livelihood-oriented financing is distinct from the original conservation transaction and requires structured, accountable access.

Implication for the BSOP process

- Publish a simple funding map showing programmes, eligibility, selection and grievance routes.
- Avoid conflating BPZ validation with separate funding decisions.
- Track community coverage and explain why specific programmes target specific locations.

6.7 Representation, inclusion and trust

Fishers requested a stronger voice in decision-making and questioned how representatives are selected. Participants called for fishers to choose their own representatives, for associations to work together and for the diversity of traditional, subsistence and commercial users to be recognised. Frustration with consultation fatigue and perceived disrespect was also evident.

Implication for the BSOP process

- Define transparent nomination, selection, tenure and reporting rules.
- Ensure geographic and livelihood diversity, including independent fishers where appropriate.
- Close the feedback loop by publishing what changed, what did not and why.

6.8 Management plan timing and adaptive management

Participants noted that management plans are a later milestone and asked that the timeline be advanced. They also questioned how future ecological needs, potential no-take changes and adaptive management would be handled without reopening uncertainty about access.

Implication for the BSOP process

- Develop management plans as early as practicable rather than waiting for the outer deadline.
- Include measurable objectives, monitoring indicators, review intervals and stakeholder triggers.
- Make any proposed change to access subject to evidence and consultation.

6.9 Wider social and sectoral priorities

Sargassum, poverty, youth fishing opportunities, lionfish markets, violence and community development were raised as part of the broader lived context. These issues do not determine the BPZ boundary, but they materially shape trust, participation and implementation.

Implication for the BSOP process

- Create a referral register with responsible agency and status.
- Consider fisher-led research, lionfish value chains and community sargassum initiatives in BSOP implementation.
- Do not allow out-of-scope issues to disappear from the record.

7. Recommendations

1. Finalise and quality-assure the spatial designation

Verify the authoritative boundaries, the 1,000-metre contour adjustment, the Sapodilla Cayes offset, High/Medium totals and the reported 30.003%. Document the calculation method and rounding.

2. Issue a validation response report

Publish a concise response-to-feedback matrix showing each major concern, the government or partner response, the change made, and the responsible body.

3. Strengthen the technical explanation

Prepare accessible English and Spanish materials explaining the selection criteria, deep-sea features, Marxan, OUS livelihood safeguards, zone rules and expected outcomes.

4. Accelerate management planning

Begin participatory management plans immediately and establish interim rules, enforcement responsibilities, monitoring arrangements and review timelines.

5. Institutionalise fisher representation

Agree transparent selection and accountability arrangements with fishing associations, cooperatives and independent users; document how representatives report back.

6. Create a coordinated livelihood response

Map existing programmes and assess priority needs concerning fuel, ice, equipment, vessel repair, seasonal hardship, market access and community finance.

7. Address coastal stressors through parallel action

Convene the relevant permitting, environment, fisheries, coast guard and planning authorities to act on dredging, mangroves, overwater development, pollution and illegal fishing.

8. Use local ecological knowledge in monitoring

Develop fisher-scientist or community monitoring pathways for deep-sea use, habitat change, lionfish, illegal activity and management effectiveness.

9. Maintain a public implementation tracker

Report milestones, responsible agencies, deadlines and status for BPZ designation, management plans, enforcement, livelihood referrals and unresolved concerns.

8. Proposed Way Forward

Timing	Priority action	Lead / coordination	Output
Immediate: 0–30 days	Verify final GIS geometry and percentages; check the validation record against audio and attendance documents; confirm legal interpretation.	CZMAI, BFiD, legal and GIS teams	Quality-assured spatial and validation record
Immediate: 0–30 days	Publish a response-to-feedback note and plain-language zoning explanation.	CZMAI and BFiD	Public validation response and FAQ
Pre-gazettal	Confirm final High/Medium classifications, permitted activities, coordinates and user safeguards.	CZMAI, BFiD and affected users	Final designation
Pre-/early implementation	Establish interim enforcement, demarcation and communication arrangements.	BFiD, Coast Guard, co-managers and partners	Operational readiness plan
Within 3–6 months	Launch participatory management planning and fisher representation mechanism.	BFiD, CZMAI, associations and communities	Management planning workplan and representation protocol
Within 3–12 months	Develop coordinated responses to livelihood needs, funding access and coastal stressors.	Relevant ministries, funding partners and local bodies	Referral and action programme
Ongoing	Monitor ecological, socioeconomic and governance indicators and publish progress.	CZMAI, BFiD and partners	Public implementation dashboard / periodic report

9. Conclusion

The National BPZ Validation Session confirmed that the adjusted Milestone 6 proposal can move forward. Stakeholders did not reject the proposed deep-sea designation or the Sapodilla Cayes redesignation, and several contributions explicitly recognised the value of protecting Belize's natural resources. The adjustment made to reduce conflict with deep-sea fishing use demonstrates that the consultation process influenced the design.

The validation also made clear that spatial designation alone will not secure durable support. Stakeholders expect the final designation to respect traditional uses, remain within the stated national target, be explained transparently, and be backed by management, enforcement, representation and fair livelihood measures. The way forward should therefore combine final technical and legal completion with an equally visible implementation and accountability programme.

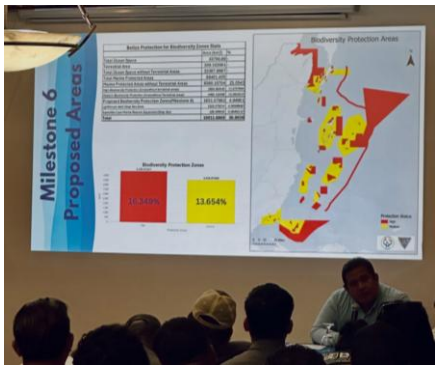
Annex 1. Validation Photos















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