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U.S. CORAL REEF TASK FORCE ANNOUNCES NEW CONSERVATION INITIATIVES AIMING AT REDUCING ILLEGAL AQUARIUM TRADE IN REEF FISH; NOAA RULES ON NEW PROTECTIONS FOR THREATENED CORAL SPECIES

The U.S. Coral Reef Task Force announced a new coral reef conservation initiative aiming for stronger enforcement of aquarium reef fish trade harvesting regulations, and endorsed designating 2008 as "International Year of the Coral Reef" at its semi-annual meeting today.

At the meeting, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) announced the listing of elkhorn coral (*Acropora palmata*) and staghorn coral (*Acropora cervicornis*) as threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. NOAA announced the proposed listing in March, 2005. Since then, NOAA received public comments and finalized the rule to add the two marine species to the Endangered Species list. The final ruling will be published next week in the Federal Register.

"This listing is highly significant for coral reef conservation, as these are the first coral species to be listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act," said retired Navy Vice Admiral Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Jr., under secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA administrator. "It is extremely important that we protect corals as they are a major source of ocean life."

The panel, which dealt with a variety of issues in the day-long meeting, received results of the task force's Local Action Strategy initiative and the findings of international collaborative assessment of recent Caribbean coral bleaching and heard an update on the proposal to designate the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem as the nation's 14th national marine sanctuary. Kameran Onley, assistant deputy secretary of interior, also assumed co-chairmanship of the task force representing the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI).

The task force approved two resolutions during the business meeting. The first resolution called on the task force to examine the use of cyanide and other poisons in the collection of reef fish on the global market. Although illegal in most countries, the use of cyanide to capture reef fish alive is widespread, and is driven by the lucrative, growing and largely unregulated international trade in live reef food fish and marine aquarium industry. The U.S. is the number one market for coral reef fish for the aquarium trade. Previous studies estimate that most live reef fish entering into international trade and imported into the U.S. are collected with the use of cyanide, and thus are illegal.

The study will research field-based cyanide detection tests for use by enforcement authorities. Tests capable of producing reliable results several weeks after exposure to cyanide could also aid the U.S. in restricting suspected illegal imports.

The panel also endorsed declaring 2008 "International Year of the Reef." The year-long campaign would include events and initiatives hosted by a wide range of government and nongovernmental organizations. A range of significant international events are planned for 2008, including the quadrennial International Coral Reef Symposium—the world's largest meeting on coral reef science and management—to be hosted by the United States in July, the

release of global and U.S. reports on the condition of coral reef ecosystems, and the 10th anniversary of the task force.

The task force received two informational reports, the first on the status of local action strategy implementation in each of seven task force jurisdictions. The report noted that the initiative leveraged approximately \$24.8 million to implement more than four hundred coral reef conservation projects involving numerous stakeholders across the seven jurisdictions.

The second presentation focused on last fall's Caribbean coral bleaching event. A team of scientists from NOAA, NASA, and DOI reported on the initial impact assessment of the worst bleaching event on record in the Caribbean. NOAA has led an international collaborative effort to fully document the extent of the event, the second in a three-phase response including initial response, near-term reporting and assessment, and long-term monitoring. Preliminary results of more than 1,500 bleaching surveys from 100 researchers in 25 jurisdictions indicate severe bleaching throughout the eastern Caribbean.

In the U.S. Virgin Islands, DOI reported that the bleaching event was followed immediately by a severe outbreak of coral disease, affecting major reef building species like brain and star corals. Elkhorn coral bleached for the first time on record in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Bleaching led directly to the death of many colonies. Of more than 460 elkhorn colonies in the Virgin Islands National Park monitored by the U.S. Geological Survey, approximately 45 percent bleached, 13 percent died partially, and 8 percent died completely.

"This event exemplifies our need to better understand the impact of bleaching on corals," said Timothy Keeney, deputy assistant secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and task force co-chair. "The near-term assessment and long-term reef monitoring will help us effectively protect and manage resilient reef ecosystems that resist and recover from bleaching events and other impacts."

In other actions the task force presented U.S. Senator Daniel K. Inouye of Hawaii with a special Coral Champion award for lifetime contributions to the conservation and management of coral reefs. An additional six task force awards were presented to five individuals and one research team for outstanding outreach and education, management, and scientific research.

A Presidential Executive Order established the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force in 1998 to lead U.S. efforts to preserve and protect coral reef ecosystems. Through the coordinated efforts of its members, including representatives of 12 federal agencies, the governors of seven states and territories, and the leaders of the Freely Associated States, the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force helps lead U.S. efforts to protect and manage valuable coral reef ecosystems in the United States and internationally. NOAA and the Department of the Interior co-chair the task force.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of the nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, 61 countries and the European Commission to develop a global network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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On the Web: NOAA - <http://www.noaa.gov>
U.S. Coral Reef Task Force - <http://www.coralreef.gov>