



SIERRA CLUB COMMENTS FOR THE U.S. CORAL REEF TASK FORCE – November, 2009 Meeting in Puerto Rico

These comments are submitted on behalf of the Sierra Club by Dave Raney and Dr. Judith Lang of the Sierra Club's Marine Action Team, Coral Reef Working Group. We regret that we will not be joining you in person for this meeting, but since Dave would have to travel all the way from Honolulu, and Dr. Lang from the East Coast, we have achieved substantial carbon offset savings. Speaking of which, we trust that the Task Force is continuing its goal of conducting carbon-neutral Task Force meetings.

We are certain that new members of the Task Force will appreciate its custom of alternating its meeting locations between Washington, D.C. and visits to jurisdictions having coral reefs. The latter tradition also includes, alternating meetings between the Atlantic or Caribbean and the Western Pacific regions. In addition to affording the members of the public the opportunity to see the Task Force at work and offer public comments, the associated field trips and workshops offer valuable opportunities for networking and mutual education. We are pleased to see that there will be workshops at the Puerto Rico meeting, but are disappointed that, at least as of October 14, the workshop on Recent Observations of Bleaching & Disease in the Caribbean Public Workshop was cancelled. We remind the Task Force that unraveling the relationships among high temperatures, high irradiance, bleaching and disease remains a top priority in the scientific community, and that any advances in understanding would be of immediate relevance to managers and even policy makers.

It is always good to be able to celebrate achievements in the difficult arena of coral reef ecosystem protection. Thus we welcome EPA's formal determination earlier this year that under the Clean Water Act "numeric" nutrient water quality criteria are necessary in Florida, and urge similar actions by the EPA for the many states that still lack such standards. We appreciate Florida Department of Environmental Protection's stated commitment to expedite the development of numeric nutrient standards, and applaud the Florida legislature for recent legislation requiring closure of the ocean outfalls off SE Florida which still discharge wastewater from sewage treatment plants.

We also welcome the action by the National Marine Fisheries Service to conduct a 90-day review of its decision on the petition by Palm Beach County Reef Rescue to revise the northern Florida boundary of the critical habitat for elkhorn and staghorn corals. We commend the actions taken by Palm Beach Reef Rescue to bring to NMFS attention important supporting data apparently overlooked in their review of Reef Rescue's initial petition.

The agenda for Tuesday, November 3 includes a report by NOAA on ship groundings. We remind the Task Force of the following request we made in our public comments submitted at the February, 2009 Task Force meeting:

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“We request that the Task Force host a full discussion of this incident (the February 5 grounding of the guided missile cruiser USS Port Royal on a coral reef near Honolulu Airport), at its meeting in Puerto Rico, including reports by relevant agencies on the extent of damage to the coral reef, recommendations for improving preventive and emergency response measures, and the nature and amount of liability for costs and damages to the coral reef.”

Although the report comes under the heading of Caribbean Region Highlights, we encourage you to have the report include reference to “lessons learned” from the Honolulu grounding.

The business meeting agenda for the Task Force includes an item called “HOLD- Potential Ocean Task Force Update.” We hope that such update will occur, since the work of the Ocean Policy Task Force is quite relevant to the work of the Task Force. In fact, in our comments to the Ocean Policy Task Force, we have pointed out that the converse is also true. The Coral Reef Task Force provides a good working model for coordination of ocean and coastal ecosystem conservation, including the various opportunities the Task Force meetings offer for public input in the various regions served by the Task Force.

We trust that there will be good participation by the public at the Puerto Rico meeting, and we are contacting our friends in the Sierra Club Puerto Rico Chapter to encourage their participation.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments.