

Palm Beach County REEF RESCUE

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Comments/Recommendations to the US Coral Reef Task Force Regarding coral reef management policy

Federal

Today the global atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration is 387 parts per million (ppm). Credible climatology models suggest a level of 400 ppm may be reached by 2015 and 450 ppm is likely to occur between 2030 and 2040. Carbon dioxide concentrations over 400 ppm are projected to increase seawater temperatures to the point where mass coral bleaching events have potential to become an annual occurrence. As carbon dioxide levels increase and seawater alkalinity decreases corals will be increasingly stressed as the synergistic effects of elevated temperature and reduced skeletal calcification capacity result in the decline of coral health leading to increased incidence of coral disease and reef degradation. We can already see the effects of elevated carbon dioxide at the ecosystem level. If we continue to emit carbon dioxide at the present rate, the worst years of past mass bleaching may become the norm by 2030. With the current business-as-usual governmental policies it is not unreasonable that we may be facing severe coral reef depletion by 2030 or even as early as 2020 from the effects of carbon emissions. If we do not have a drastic reduction in atmospheric carbon dioxide and a return to a level of 350 ppm, by the middle of the century ocean acidification is likely to severely impact global coral reef development with resulting economic impacts, societal disruption and human tragedy.

By comparison all other coral reef management programs become moot if policy makers are unable to limit carbon emissions. Therefore, it is our recommendation that the US Coral Reef Task Force (USCRTF) embark upon an aggressive initiative to educate the public and governmental leaders about the importance of coral reefs and their susceptibility to the already excessive carbon dioxide concentrations. Further, we request USCRTF communicate with the Obama administration and provide guidance to enable the US to take a leadership role at the upcoming Copenhagen Climate Summit and to help craft a carbon emission policy that will achieve coral reef sustainability.

Florida

Approximately 100 miles of the Florida Coral Reef Tract north of the Key Biscayne Sanctuary remain without an effective management program. As an example the seemingly simple, yet vitally important enforcement of preventing recreational boats

To monitor, preserve and protect the coral reef ecosystem of South Florida through research, education and public aware

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from anchoring on this coral reef system is not a reality. For over five years Palm Beach County Reef Rescue (PBCRR) has attempted to work with enforcement to get an on-water agency presence to address this problem. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has not only failed to cooperate on this issue their actions in many instances may be characterized as obstructionist. PBCRR has reported many dozens of boat anchoring incidents in the coral, supplying FWC with GPS coordinates, vessel registration numbers and photographs of anchors embedded in the reef. The FWC response in years past has been that Florida Statute 68B-42.009 which prohibits take or to otherwise destroy coral was not intended to address anchor damage.

In July 2009, the Florida Coral Reef Protection Act was signed into law and clearly defines a coral reef, prohibits anchoring and provides a schedule of fines for damages. FWC has refused to take enforcement action under the Act and has not responded to anchoring incidents called in to them.

The vast majority of large boulder corals in Palm Beach County exhibit the scars of anchor impact and secondary infection. These monument corals are dying from anchor damage, laws are in place to protect them, but there is no initiative by the enforcement community to take action on the water. FDEP has cooperated and made an effort to send warning letters to boaters documented to have been anchored on the reef, but sadly the only on-water presence to monitor anchoring remains the volunteer recreational scuba diving community.

Sincerely,
Ed Tichenor, Director
Palm Beach County Reef Rescue