

**Report from**  
**THE 5<sup>TH</sup> MEETING OF THE US CORAL REEF TASK FORCE**

**U.S. Coral Reef Task Force Makes Historic Strides to Address the Coral Reef Crisis**

The global decline in the condition of coral reefs is a crisis that places a multitude of human, natural and economic needs in jeopardy. The rapid decline of the world's productive and economically vital coral reefs represents a serious threat to consumers, businesses, communities, cultures and the environment.

Meeting in Pago Pago, American Samoa on August 5 and 7, the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force announced that it has made measurable achievements in its efforts to help save the world's coral reefs. Significant progress began this year to map, monitor and conserve U.S. and other coral reefs to ensure that these valuable ecosystems survive the current threats from pollution, over-fishing, over-use, and other impacts. Many of these achievements were made possible by new federal funding in fiscal year 2000 and strong partnerships between the federal, state, territory and Commonwealth members of the Task Force. Future action on these and many other coral reef activities is in question as the U.S. Congress considers whether or not to provide federal agency funding for coral reef activities next year.

In his opening comments, Dr. D. James Baker, Under Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere (US Department of Commerce) stated that "the long-term sustainable use and conservation of our coral reef ecosystems is a goal that should be above partisan politics." One of the principal objectives of this 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Task Force was to ensure that the partners are able to continue in the years ahead to build on the strong foundation that has been established. The Task Force agreed that a conceptual framework for future Task Force activities needs to include an oversight policy and a charter to formalize the operations of the Task Force. A second important objective of this meeting was to move forward with the coordination of Task Force efforts to meet its goal of designation of 20% of representative US coral reef habitats as "no-take" marine protected areas.

No less important than these two objectives was for the Task Force to also experience first hand the important connection between island peoples and their coral reef resources. "These coral reef resources support millions of jobs and contribute billions of dollars to the U.S. economy", said Dr. Baker. "In Hawaii alone, gross revenues generated from just a single, half square mile coral reef reserve are estimated to be more than \$8.6 million each year. Coral reefs are also an integral part of many island cultures. By protecting coral reefs we are not just protecting beautiful areas; we are preserving the sustainability of our communities, their cultural heritage, and their coastal economies."

**At the meeting in American Samoa, a number of important Task Force accomplishments that have recently been made to implement the National Action Plan were highlighted. These included:**

- Providing \$1.3 million to assist Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands in implementing their All-Islands Coral Reef Initiative conservation measures such as monitoring reef health, reducing human impacts, and educating reef users on how to protect reef resources.
- Removal of 9 abandoned and grounded ships that were damaging coral reefs in American Samoa since 1991. Clean up is nearly complete and efforts to restore and monitor the reef recovery are underway.
- Launching a massive effort to map all U.S. coral reefs in the Pacific beginning with the Hawaiian Islands. Data collected from satellites, planes and on-the-ground surveys will be used to map and monitor over 200,000 acres of coral reefs for the first time.
- Initial approval by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to establish "no-anchoring areas" to allow countries to prevent large ships from damaging coral reefs and other fragile coastal habitats. If approved, the U.S. proposal would create the first "no-anchoring" areas to protect the coral reefs of the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary in the Gulf of Mexico.
- Completing the first ever inventory of U.S. coral reef marine protected areas as part of its effort to build a national system of coral reef protected areas. In March, the Task Force called for improving the effectiveness of existing sites, considering new sites, and setting aside a minimum of 20% of U.S. coral reefs as no-take "ecological reserves" to ensure the long-term survival of reefs and the species that depend on them.

**The Task Force also identified and heard from meeting participants about new opportunities and challenges. These included:**

- The Administration has signed a new executive order on marine protected areas which directly supports the Coral Reef Task Force efforts on MPAs.
- The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has received a request for the creation of a new and independent Pacific Islands Sea Grant Consortium that will focus much of its efforts on supporting the goals and priorities of the All Islands Coral Reef Initiative. Dr. Baker stated his commitment that NOAA will support this effort.
- The House of Representatives Resources Committee has reported out the "Saxton-Faleomavaega Bill" (H.R. 3919), which is very supportive of Coral Reef Task Force efforts.

- Senators Inouye and Snow have each introduced coral legislation and are working on a compromise which may move through the Senate Commerce Committee in September.
- The House has also expressed interest in holding hearings and drafting coral trade legislation in their next session.
- The President's budget request for FY 2001 includes \$26 million (\$ 16 million for the Department of Commerce, \$ 10 million for the Department of the Interior) to specifically address the most serious threats to coral reefs. This funding is essential to implementing many of the priority federal actions called for in the Task Force National Action Plan.

**The Task Force called for a number of specific actions to be taken, including:**

- Committing to assist the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) in developing new guidance under the National Environmental Policy Act to help federal agencies ensure that their actions do not degrade coral reefs, as required by the Coral Reef Protection Executive Order #13089.
- Assigning the Coast Guard as the lead in efforts to develop a national strategy for dealing with abandoned vessels and debris that negatively impact coral reefs. The Task Force recommended that a draft resolution, submitted by the All Islands Committee, related to this issue be posted on the Task Force homepage for public comment.
- Approving the All Islands Committee motion (presented by Governor Sunia) that efforts to create a nationally coordinated system of coral reef MPAs include multiple use zonation management strategies and take into consideration cultural and subsistence-use, as described in the "Alternative Access Management Strategies for Marine Protected Areas: A Reference Manual for their Development and Assessment".
- Directing Task Force staff to make available a draft Task Force Charter for public comment, by September 15, 2000.
- Directing Task Force staff to revise the interim Oversight Policy based on Task Force discussion, and to make it available for public comment by September 15, 2000
- Approving the All Islands motion that the Freely Associated States (Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Marshall Islands) be invited to participate on the Task Force in "observer" status. The formal resolution on this issue will be posted on the Task Force homepage site.
- Agreeing to have the existing Task Force Steering Committee consider the All Islands motion to establish an Implementation Committee consisting of an appropriate member from the Department of Commerce, the Department of the Interior and two members from the All Islands Group, with one of the All Island

members chairing the committee. A draft resolution on this issue will be posted on the Task Force homepage site for public comment.

- Charging the Task Force Steering Committee with preparing a “US Coral Reef Task Force Progress Report to the Nation”.
- Expressing concern regarding continued federal funding support for coral reef activities in FY01, and charging Task Force staff to draft a letter on this subject to be transmitted from the Task Force to appropriate Congressional leaders.
- Accepting the invitation of Secretary Pagan (made through the Chair of the All Islands Committee) to hold the next full meeting of the Task Force in Puerto Rico and that this meeting would be held in approximately 12 months. In addition, an interim meeting of the Task Force will be held in the February 2001 timeframe in Washington, DC.

## **Grounded Vessel Removal**

A *DRAFT* Resolution of the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the US Coral Reef Task Force  
August 5 and 7, 2000 – American Samoa

Whereas vessel groundings on coral reefs can cause extensive environmental degradation from the spilling of oil to the grinding and scarring of coral reef habitat; and

Whereas the current Oil Pollution Act of 1990 sets up a response for oil and hazardous material removal but does not fund the removal of the vessel from the reef; and

Whereas studies have shown that leaving the wreck on the reef has the potential to cause further degradation of the reef ecosystem; and

Whereas it has been difficult to collect money from the vessel owners to assist in the wreck removal, therefore vessels are left to break apart and scatter wreckage across the reef; and

Whereas the recent cooperative efforts between the federal agencies and the states and territories to deal with vessel removals in American Samoa and Hawai'i has set an important precedent for dealing with future groundings;

### **Be it therefore resolved:**

That the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force recommends the following actions:

Require a bond or surety for all fishing vessels entering U.S. territorial waters for the purposes of conducting business at U.S. ports adjacent to coral reefs, as appropriate;

Make recommendations for additional legislation and a funding mechanism in addition to the Oil Pollution Act to broaden the ability to remove grounded vessels as needed;

Establish national legislation for coral reef damage assessment, including cultural losses, to serve as a guideline for both fines and restoration costs; and

Develop federal assistance protocols to augment the Islands' ability to initiate rapid response for vessel damage assessment and removal including training, prearranged access to DOI, DOC, DOT and DOD assistance in the event of immediate and critical environmental damage.

Please provide comments on the above draft resolution to:

Dr. Michael P. Crosby ([mcrosby@usaid.gov](mailto:mcrosby@usaid.gov)),  
Athline Clark ([athline@leka.aloha.net](mailto:athline@leka.aloha.net)), or  
Roger Griffis ([roger.b.griffis@noaa.gov](mailto:roger.b.griffis@noaa.gov))

**Invitation for the Freely Associated States to Participate**  
**A Resolution of the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the US Coral Reef Task Force**  
**August 5 and 7, 2000 – American Samoa**

Whereas the Freely Associated States of Micronesia have long-standing relationships with the United States, through Compacts of Free Association and institutional affiliations; and

Whereas these countries have diverse coral reef resources of critical importance to their present and future well-being, mutual interests in the protection of coral reef resources, and valuable expertise to contribute to Coral Reef Task Force initiatives,

**Be it therefore resolved:**

That the Coral Reef Task Force invites the Freely Associated States of Micronesia, namely the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of Belau, to participate in all future U.S. Coral Reef Task Force meetings and activities.

**National Action Plan Implementation**  
A *DRAFT* Resolution of the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the US Coral Reef Task Force  
August 5 and 7, 2000 – American Samoa

Whereas it has been recommended that the Coral Reef Task Force develop a structure and process for implementation of the National Action Plan; and

Whereas the majority of the US coral reef resources are under the jurisdiction of the Pacific and Caribbean islands, states, territories, and commonwealths; and

Whereas the “All Islands Points of Contact” have both longevity and continuity beyond the upcoming change in administration.

***Be it therefore resolved:***

That the Coral Reef Task Force commits to establishing a formal governance structure for the implementation of the National Action Plan by September 1, 2000; and

That the Implementation Committee consists of an appropriate member from the Department of Commerce, the Department of the Interior and two members from the All Islands Group.

We further recommend that one of the All Island members chair the committee; and that the implementation of the National Action Plan is consistent with the existing commitments and priorities previously established.

This reaffirms the commitment of the Coral Reef Task Force to prioritizing the goals of the All Island Coral Initiative in implementing the US Coral Reef National Action Plan.

Please provide comments on the above draft resolution to:  
Dr. Michael P. Crosby ([mcrosby@usaid.gov](mailto:mcrosby@usaid.gov)),  
Gerry Davis ([gdavis@mail.gov.gu](mailto:gdavis@mail.gov.gu)) or  
Roger Griffis ([roger.b.griffis@noaa.gov](mailto:roger.b.griffis@noaa.gov))