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FOR INSULAR AFFAIRS,
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS,
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
REGARDING THE CONSERVATION OF CORAL REEFS

March 6, 2007

Chairwoman Bordallo and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you to update you on the Department of the Interior's coral reef conservation efforts. I understand that Delegate Faleomavaega recently introduced H.R. 1205, the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2007, which would amend and reauthorize the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000 to expand the existing coral reef conservation program and provide statutory authorization for the United States Coral Reef Task Force.

Executive Order 13089 on coral reefs establishes the Secretary of the Interior as co-chair of the Task Force, along with the Secretary of Commerce, and establishes the foundation for a cooperative conservation approach among the 21 Federal, State, Territorial, and Freely Associated State members of the Coral Reef Task Force. The Department fully supports the Coral Reef Task Force's cooperative conservation approach to advancing common coral conservation goals, needs, priorities, and challenges.

The Department is not currently authorized to carry out coral-related activities under the Coral Reef Conservation Act. However, we are actively discussing reauthorization of that Act with our federal partners, including appropriate authority for the Department under that Act, and we look forward to reviewing H.R. 1205 in detail. With this in mind, I should note that five Departmental bureaus and offices conduct programs that contribute to improving our nation's scientific understanding and cooperative conservation of coral reefs. These include technical assistance and direct grants to the states, territories and private partners in support of local action strategies. These bureaus and offices also conduct field-based coral conservation through joint scientific research and monitoring, response to damage and injury events, and cooperative conservation and collaborative management of marine managed areas with states and territories. We support language in any reauthorization of the Act that provides comprehensive authority for the Department to coordinate its programs in support of our efforts as co-chair of the Task Force.

In addition, although the federal government has clear statutory authority to address coral reef damage from groundings in designated protected areas such as national parks and national marine sanctuaries, our authority to respond to groundings that occur outside of such areas is more limited. The Administration believes that making such authority applicable to appropriate Federal agencies involved in coral reef conservation would enable the Federal government to more effectively respond to damaging events. Appropriate authority would allow agencies to

respond to events and recover from the responsible party the costs for both this response and carrying out, where necessary, comprehensive damage assessment and restoration activities on injured coral reefs.

Let me first provide a bit of background on the Coral Reef Task Force and the Department's role in that group. I will then discuss the efforts of the Department's Office of Insular Affairs (OIA) in coral reef conservation, and conclude with a brief summary of what the Department's bureaus are doing in this effort.

Background on Coral Reef Task Force

Executive Order 13089, issued in June 1998, established the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force, and was the impetus for the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000. The chairmanship is shared jointly by the Departments of Interior and Commerce, with other federal members including the Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Homeland Security (in particular the U.S. Coast Guard), Justice, State and Transportation, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the National Science Foundation and the Agency for International Development. The States of Florida and Hawaii, the only States with coral reefs, and the U.S. territories and the three sovereign island nations in "free association" with the U.S. (Freely Associated States) have also been asked by the Task Force to join, and they have played an invaluable role with the Task Force.

The Department of the Interior co-chairs the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force, along with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in the Department of Commerce, in part because we have over 3.6 million acres of coral reefs and associated habitats under our jurisdiction, mostly in National Wildlife Refuges and National Parks. Within the Department, OIA, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the National Park Service (NPS), the Minerals Management Service (MMS), the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) have responsibilities for coral reef research and conservation. The territorial Governors, Freely Associated States' Presidents, and the All Islands Coral Reef Committee provide significant guidance and direction to the Task Force.

In 2000, the Task Force developed and approved a National Action Plan to Conserve Coral Reefs, a comprehensive program of research, mapping, monitoring, conservation and management, to carry out its Executive Order mandate. In 2002, NOAA, with the Task Force, developed a National Action Strategy under the provisions of the Coral Reef Conservation Act to prioritize the activities in the Plan. The Task Force has subsequently undertaken steps that have resulted in major advances in coral research and conservation efforts.

Of particular interest to this committee is the cooperation with, and assistance to, the states and territories to develop and implement Local Action Strategies for conserving their coral resources At its Fall 2002 meeting, the Task Force adopted the "Puerto Rico Resolution", establishing threat-based priorities for action. These include land-based sources of pollution, over-fishing, recreational misuse, lack of public understanding of the needs and importance of shallow-water coral reefs, and disease and climate change/coral bleaching.

In each jurisdiction, the decisions on what actions to undertake were based on community input, generally through extensive public meetings, so this is a locally-driven set of priorities that contribute to national goals for coral reef conservation. Support for the Local Action Strategies is one of the key elements of the coral reef segment of the President's Ocean Action Plan.

Also under the President's Plan, the National Park System, the National Marine Sanctuary Program, the National Estuarine Research Reserve System, and the National Wildlife Refuge System are charged with increasing coordination of the Nation's marine and coastal managed areas. In support of this effort, a General Agreement was signed in August 2006 by the Department and NOAA to increase the coordination of parks, sanctuaries, estuarine reserves, and refuges in their efforts to develop a seamless network to protect and conserve these areas, including coral reefs under their respective jurisdictions.

When implemented, this seamless network agreement will facilitate and enhance scientific understanding and conservation of these special resources and increase coordination with our state, public, and private partners.

Activities in the Office of Insular Affairs

As you know, the Secretary of the Interior has administrative responsibility for coordinating federal policy in the territories of American Samoa, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and administering the financial assistance provided to the Freely Associated States (the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau) under the Compacts of Free Association. The Office of Insular Affairs performs these functions on behalf of the Secretary. With an annual budget of over $400 million, OIA provides significant financial and technical assistance to the U.S. territories and the Freely Associated States. OIA has $495,000 in the FY 2008 President's budget for coral reef protection and management.

Healthy coral reef resources are an integral part of the economy and environment of these island communities. Among the most diverse and biologically complex ecosystems on earth, coral reefs protect island communities from coastal erosion and storm damage, provide habitat to numerous species, and support important tourism and recreational industries.

Coral reef resources are now threatened by a variety of stresses including poor water quality, over-harvesting, coastal development, disease and bleaching. According to recent estimates, more than 25 percent of the world's coral reefs already have been lost or severely damaged.

With the majority of U.S. coral reefs located in the insular areas, OIA plays a critical role in our efforts to develop effective programs to sustainably manage and protect coral reef resources. The office works closely with the islands, and our Task Force partners, to identify and implement a broad scope of management actions from education and outreach to the establishment of marine protected areas and increased enforcement. Each island jurisdiction has established its own local advisory committee(s) for strategic planning and priority setting. OIA

has also supported the development and implementation of pioneering resource management efforts in the Freely Associated States, including the development of a blueprint for creating a national system of protected areas for the Federated States of Micronesia, natural resource assessments of the atolls of the Marshall Islands, and protection of critical marine resources in the Republic of Palau.

Local Action Strategies discussed briefly above form the basis for a significant portion of the annual grant awards, which are jointly administered by OIA and NOAA. Members of the Coral Reef Task Force periodically evaluate progress and identify new priorities and actions for the Local Action Strategies. Local jurisdictions are beginning to update their Local Action Strategies in FY 2008; the Office, NOAA and other Task Force agencies are developing updated LAS guidance, and are meeting with local coral reef advisory groups to identify short and long-term priority needs to improve their coral reefs.

Through financial and technical assistance, OIA has supported the development of several new initiatives. Among these is the Micronesia Challenge, launched at the Task Force meeting in Palau in 2006 by the region's heads of governments. With its goal of conserving 30 percent of near-shore marine resources and 20 percent of forest resources by 2020, the Micronesia Challenge is one of the most ambitious and visionary initiatives to address coral reef protection. These targets far exceed current goals of international conventions and emphasize the need for Micronesian leaders to work together to confront environmental and sustainable development issues. The OIA and NOAA jointly supported the December 2006 Micronesia Challenge action planning in Palau.

Funds provided by OIA, in partnership with NOAA, have helped Guam and the CNMI develop significant plans to restore key watersheds. Restoration of these watersheds will alleviate the effects of run-off and other threats to the adjacent coral reefs in Guam and CNMI. OIA will work with the local coral reef advisory groups to implement the next phases of these watershed improvement projects.

The Natural Resource Assessment Surveys program of the Marshall Islands has also received significant support from OIA's coral reef initiative. Assessments of the coral reefs have been completed with OIA support and technical assistance from FWS for Majuro, Rongelap, Namu, Mili, Ailinginae, and Ailuk Atolls. Local communities are using these assessments to develop and carry out marine resource management plans for their atolls. The assessments of Ailinginae Atoll will serve as the basis for declaring it a World Heritage Site.

The Office of Insular Affairs, in cooperation with other federal, local and international partners, supported development of *A Blueprint for Conserving the Biodiversity of the Federated States of Micronesia*, which provides a framework for creating the first national system of protected areas for the FSM and serves as a model for the region. OIA and NOAA are working together to support implementation of many of the Blueprint's goals, including the Conservation Action Planning process to guide local site conservation actions, establishing partnerships to support and implement conservation interventions, and conducting marine resources assessments in areas with data gaps such as Kosrae and Pohnpei. OIA has also been instrumental in supporting

NOAA's efforts to create the Pacific Islands Marine Protected Area Community (PIMPAC), which is working across the region to advance local community support for marine protection and management

OIA has partnered with the National Park Service and a consortium of universities known as the Joint Institute for Caribbean Marine Studies (Rutgers, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, University of the Virgin Islands and University of South Carolina) to establish a new marine research and education center (Center) in St. Croix, USVI. The Salt River Bay Marine Research and Education Center would be a nexus for marine research and education in the Caribbean, supporting science-based decision making for managers throughout the region, providing education and outreach to students and the public, and restoring a world-class facility to the island. The feasibility study for the Center was completed in 2006 and the Environmental Assessment is under review.

The Office of Insular Affairs continues to focus its coral reef program on improving the health of coral reefs in the U.S.-affiliated insular areas to ensure long-term economic and social benefits through enhanced local management and protection.

Other Department of the Interior Coral Reef Efforts

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The Fish and Wildlife Service manages 13 National Wildlife Refuges that include significant coral reefs. FWS also protects and restores reefs and other species and habitats, enforces laws, and works with other countries to foster reef conservation worldwide. Virtually all of these approaches are founded upon partnerships--collaborative efforts with other federal agencies, state, local, and territorial governments, and concerned private groups. In combination, these dedicated partners can help reduce the threats to coral reefs and conserve these vital parts of our global heritage.

· *National Wildlife Refuges:* FWS manages 10 coral reef National Wildlife Refuges (NWR) in the Pacific, which include approximately 2,164,000 acres of coral reefs and adjacent ocean habitat, and 3 coral refuges in South Florida and the Caribbean totaling about 756,000 acres. Additionally, the FWS is a proud co-trustee (with NOAA Sanctuaries and the State of Hawaii) in the new 89 million-acre Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument – the world's largest fully-protected conservation area, on land or in the ocean. President Bush established this, building on Teddy Roosevelt's legacy when he established the Hawaiian Islands NWR in 1908. The FWS also manages nine Remote Pacific Island NWRs, considered the "crown jewels" of Federal public trust coral reef holdings. These remote Pacific NWRs serve as natural laboratories that scientists use as baselines examples of non-human-undisturbed coral ecosystems. The NWR System works closely with NOAA on many research projects. To ensure that long-term conservation goals are achieved, the FWS is developing and implementing Comprehensive Conservation Management Plans for all of its refuges with coral reefs. In close consultation with their federal and local partners, refuges are also developing and employing innovative tools for managing coral reefs, including habitat restoration, education and outreach,

law enforcement, research and monitoring, and improving the public's enjoyment of the refuges.

· *Coral Reef Conservation, Restoration, and Protection:* One FWS goal is to ensure that human activities do not adversely affect coral reefs or species, such as endangered sea turtles, that rely on healthy reefs. FWS programs for endangered species protection, coastal habitat restoration, fisheries management, and review of federal actions, as well as direct assistance to states and Territories, all help to conserve coral reefs. The FWS is also statutorily designated to comment on Clean Water Act section 404 permits and other water-related development activities under federal authorization or permit. FWS biologists regularly coordinate with federal, state, Territorial, and private groups to ensure that during project development, coral reef fish and wildlife are considered equally with other project-related features and adverse impacts to coral reef ecosystems from coastal and nearshore marine projects are avoided or reduced. When accidents harm reefs, FWS works with partners to assess the damage and expedite reef recovery.

Other coral conservation efforts are more proactive: for example, the coastal partnership program implements projects that protect coastal habitats before they are degraded or restores degraded coral reef and coastal habitats, often supporting local action strategy projects. Examples of conservation efforts include conducting surveys of coral reefs near proposed development projects to assess potential impacts, developing recommendations to preserve the integrity of reefs, and deploying navigational aids in areas to prevent boat groundings and anchor damage.

· *Enforcing International Trade Laws:* The United States is the primary market for imported coral, which is used in jewelry and the aquarium trade. Many species of coral are listed in Appendix II of CITES, which allows enforcement agencies to monitor and regulate commercial imports. FWS enforces international fish and wildlife-related trade laws by inspecting coral imports, intercepting illegal shipments, and collecting and maintaining U.S. trade data for coral reef species. In a partnership effort, FWS and NOAA developed and distributed the *Guide to Indo-Pacific Corals in International Wildlife Trade*, a reference to assist inspectors and enforcement officers, to assist international efforts to control the trade of coral. FWS is working with partners to combat the use of sodium cyanide poisoning, a method for collecting live reef fish for food and the aquarium industry that causes widespread destruction of the living reef.

· *International Conservation of Coral Reefs:* FWS is fostering the conservation of reefs in other countries through training and education programs, as well as projects that promote the conservation of species and habitats within a watershed framework. Among the important habitats linked to coral reefs and targeted for conservation are seagrass beds and mangrove forests. The Western Hemisphere Program sponsors protected area manager training through two international programs, Mexico/RESERVA and Brazil/AMUC. The program also awards small grants to promote the involvement of local communities and organizations in coral reef conservation activities. FWS works closely with OIA on projects designed to reduce coral reef impacts in the freely associated states.

National Park Service

The National Park Service manages ten park units with coral reef habitats of almost 275,000 acres (270,000 acres in the South Atlantic/Caribbean and 5,000 in the Pacific). Among these is Dry Tortugas National Park in South Florida, established in 1908 as the world's first marine protected area. On July 1, 2001, it became part of the largest fully protected underwater ecological reserve in North America when NOAA established the Tortugas Ecological Reserve, and on November 16, 2006 the State of Florida and the National Park Service concurred on regulations to implement the Research Natural Area and provide full protection to coral reefs, seagrass beds and fish in 46 square miles of the Park. Biscayne National Park, established in 1968 to protect and preserve a nationally significant marine ecosystem, is the largest NPS coral reef unit, with about 172,500 acres of coral reefs, mangrove shorelines, and coastal estuaries. The nearshore reefs at War in the Pacific NHP, Guam, are home to an estimated 3,500 to 4,000 species and are among the most diverse ecosystems within the National Park System. NPS works internationally to share expertise and knowledge with others and to improve the level of protection afforded coral reef parks in the United States and elsewhere.

NPS scientists, in conjunction with scientists from the USGS, were able to statistically quantify through intensive long term monitoring at Virgin Islands National Park and Buck Island Reef National Monument the scale and extent of recent coral bleaching and death from the most severe coral bleaching event ever recorded in the Virgin Islands. Nearly 50 percent of live coral cover among major reef-building species died at six sites from the effects of bleaching and disease. NPS and USGS also measured bleaching of elkhorn corals, recently listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, of which 50 percent bleached at monitoring sites on St. John. Long term monitoring efforts and microbial research will support development of habitat and species protection plans under new rules for elkhorn and staghorn corals.

U.S. Geological Survey

The USGS is one of the Nation’s principal natural science and information agencies conducting research, monitoring and assessments to improve our understanding of the natural world. With research centers and field stations in Florida, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Hawaii and elsewhere across the Nation, USGS is providing resource managers with information critical to understanding the ecology, health, and management of coral reefs. USGS coral reef research focuses on understanding the structure and function of reef communities. High resolution thematic mapping and characterization are utilized to address reef health and change, geologic growth and development, the effects of sediment transport on reefs, and the interactions of groundwater and reef health. In addition, USGS scientists are investigating the relationships between water quality and coral health and disease; the effects of fishing and no take zones on coral reef resources; and developing new monitoring techniques.

Minerals Management Service

As steward of our federal offshore lands known as the Outer Continental Shelf, the Minerals Management Service is responsible for balancing the Nation’s search for petroleum energy and marine minerals with the protection of the human, marine, and coastal environments. The MMS

environmental programs serve this important mission by providing the information necessary for informed decisions on energy and non-energy mineral planning and development activities for the Outer Continental Shelf.

Since the early 1970s, MMS has supported a comprehensive program of mapping and multidisciplinary study of the East and West Flower Garden Banks, located in a petroleum-rich area in the Gulf of Mexico. The Flower Garden Banks are a pair of topographic features, topped by an array of reef-building corals and associated organisms, that are now largely within a National Marine Sanctuary. MMS is currently supporting a long-term monitoring effort, co-sponsored by the National Marine Sanctuary Program, to assess the health of the coral reefs and evaluate changes in the coral community. MMS will use this information to evaluate the adequacy and effectiveness of current lease stipulations in protecting the important biological resources of the Flower Garden Banks. To date, scientific assessments show that the corals of the East and West Flower Garden Banks are healthy and growing.

This concludes my formal statement, and I am happy to respond to any questions you may have.