

COMMERCE NEWS

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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BUSH ADMINISTRATION CALLS FOR GREATER PROTECTION OF NATION'S CORAL REEFS

WASHINGTON – The Bush Administration delivered proposed legislation to Congress today calling for greater protection for the nation's coral reefs. The bill, the Coral Reef Ecosystem Conservation Amendments Act of 2007, reauthorizes the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000 and adds greater protections for coral reefs while enhancing marine debris removal and increasing the government's ability to work through cooperative partnerships.

“Our coral reefs continue to be severely threatened and this bill continues the Administration's aggressive commitment to ocean stewardship as called for in the President's Ocean Action Plan,” said Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez. “It will give us the tools we need not only to protect corals, but also to help restore this valuable resource.”

The Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Coral Reef Conservation Program supports effective management and sound science. Through this program, NOAA partners with scientific, private, government and nongovernmental organizations at the local, state, federal and international levels to preserve, sustain and restore valuable coral reef ecosystems.

“The Administration proposal for reauthorizing this Act is an important step forward for the partnerships that are working to conserve our coral reefs, said Interior Secretary Dick Kempthorne. “It will help the coral conservation programs within the Department, and increase our ability to assist the States and territories with their efforts.”

Corals reefs, a critical part of the ocean's ecosystem, teem with fish, lobsters, sponges, sea turtles and thousands of other creatures that rely on them for their survival. Coral reefs also are important to the economy, providing millions of people around the globe with food, coastal storm protection and jobs. Nearly a quarter of the world's reefs are under imminent risk of collapse from human pressures and a fifth have already been effectively destroyed and show no immediate prospects for recovery.

Major causes of reef decline are land-based pollution, disease, habitat destruction, over fishing, climate change, vessel groundings, and coastal development. In order to address threats that have continued to increase since the original legislation was passed in 2000, this bill explicitly focuses implementation and management on better understanding issues associated with climate change such as coral disease and bleaching. The proposal will also mandate the establishment of consistent guidelines for maintaining environmental data, products and information allowing for more effective management approaches.

Seeking to address vessel impacts to reefs, the legislation establishes a new emergency response account to fund emergency response, stabilization, and restoration following incidents that injure coral reefs. The bill also makes it unlawful to destroy or injure any coral reef and allows the government to recover response and restoration costs from responsible parties. It provides for the removal of abandoned fishing gear, marine debris, and abandoned vessels from coral reef ecosystems in federal waters and allows for assistance to states for removal of marine debris.

Recognizing that NOAA's and DOI's existing partnerships are some of the most effective assets in addressing threats to corals, the bill is designed to facilitate existing partnerships with other agencies, governments and organizations to help protect and recover corals. NOAA and DOI now co-chair the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force, co-manage the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument with the State of Hawaii, and cooperate in many other coral reef conservation efforts.

The proposed legislation would for the first time establish a damage recovery process for the coral reefs in National Wildlife Refuges, and increase the effectiveness of the current authorities for recovering damages to reefs in National Parks and National Marine Sanctuaries. It also provides statutory authorization for Department of the Interior coral conservation activities, which are now conducted under general conservation authorities that do not mention coral reefs.

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