

NOAA05-R499-05

Contact: Ben Sherman, NOAA Public Affairs
(301) 713-3066 ext. 178

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 10, 2005

**U.S. CORAL REEF TASK FORCE CALLS ON MEMBERS TO ENHANCE TECHNICAL
ASSISTANCE EFFORTS,
NOAA RESPONDS WITH \$750K GRANT FOR PACIFIC ISLANDS**

KOROR, Palau – As they wrapped up a two-day meeting today in Koror, the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force (Task Force) called for the continuation and growth of initiatives that enhance local management and research effectiveness throughout U.S. and international coral reef areas.

“We have made significant progress in identifying challenges and opportunities for cooperative research and coral reef management in the western Pacific and throughout U.S. waters,” said Timothy Keeney, deputy assistant secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and Task Force co-chair. “The presenters today made clear that continued success will require harnessing our collective resources to ensure regional coral reef managers have the human and technical resources they need to conserve valuable coral reef ecosystems for future generations.”

To enhance regional conservation and management efforts, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced a \$750,000 grant award for the Pacific Islands Educational Partnership Consortium (PIEPC), whose member institutions include the University of Guam, American Samoa Community College, the College of Micronesia, the College of the Marshall Islands, Northern Marianas College and Palau Community College. The grant will support program enhancements designed to increase the number of students who train and graduate in the marine and environmental sciences, including direct support for high school through undergraduate students from the Pacific Island community, curriculum development, teacher training, and enhancing research capabilities.

The 14th biannual meeting featured discussions on Pacific and Micronesian needs for enhancing conservation effectiveness. The first session focused on building financial, human and technical capacity in the Pacific Islands, with expert panelists from U.S and international agencies, and leading conservation organizations. The second session highlighted challenges and opportunities for building marine protected area networks in reef ecosystems in the Pacific Ocean.

The Task Force also passed a series of resolutions during the two-day meeting. In recognition of one of the worst regional-scale coral bleaching events on record in the Caribbean, the Task Force called on members to lead a coordinated interagency response and to regionally monitor the extent of bleaching, mortality, coral recovery and the ecological and sociological impacts of this bleaching event. This resolution also called for improving U.S. capabilities to forecast thermal stress and its ecosystem impacts in order to enhance management and conservation of coral reef ecosystems. Networks of marine protected areas were identified as a primary mechanism for protecting coral reefs against the combined impact of a range of threats, with an emphasis on protecting stress-resilient corals that demonstrate a high survival or recovery from past bleaching events.

The second resolution called for improving agency capabilities to prevent and respond to major damage events in coral reef ecosystems, such as the damage caused by vessel groundings. In response to the recent number of major events damaging coral reef ecosystems, the meeting featured a special panel on technical capacity needs and lessons learned in responding to major damage events in the Pacific Islands.

The third resolution called on member agencies to create collaborative partnerships to strengthen the effectiveness of existing sites; to provide technical assistance and help local officials to better use and integrate science into the design and management of protected areas; and to assist NOAA with completion of the ongoing inventory and assessment of U.S. coral reef protected areas prior to the next Task Force meeting in winter 2006.

The Task Force also called on members to coordinate and integrate their protected area efforts as appropriate with the ongoing initiative to develop the National System of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), as called for by Presidential Executive Order 13158 on MPAs.

In response to a series of interagency enforcement workshops throughout U.S. waters, the Task Force called for increasing agency capacity to carry out effective enforcement of environmental, marine and natural resource regulations. Of highest priority is the continued training for resource management staff and the development of written training guidance and guidebooks. In addition, the Task Force called for an investigation of the feasibility of developing judicial training programs for regional judicial officials. Further, the Task Force endorsed the International Coral Reef Initiative's (ICRI) efforts to increase enforcement capacity internationally and called for coordination of ICRI and Task Force activities.

In addition to the resolutions, the Task Force discussed two major national reports released this year on the state of coral reef conservation, management and research: *The State of Coral Reef Ecosystems of the U.S. and Freely Associated States: 2005*, and *Implementation of the Coral Reef National Action Strategy: Report to Congress*.

Immediately preceding the business meeting, select delegates of the Task Force met jointly with the International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI), a global partnership among more than 80 governments, international organizations, and non-government organizations that strives to preserve coral reefs and related ecosystems. The meeting included a workshop on sustainable financing for coral reef management and research, and a session on improving international cooperation in the Pacific Islands. In response, the Task Force charged its Steering Committee with reviewing recommendations from the sustainable financing workshop, including development of a work plan for creation of a sustainable financing "toolkit."

One individual was presented with a special "Coral Champion" award for outstanding lifetime contributions to the conservation and management of coral reefs. Noah Idechong, Delegate for the Palau National Congress, was recognized for his leadership and dedication to conservation of coastal and marine resources for future generations by promoting innovative partnerships and sound stewardship at local, nation and international levels. An additional thirteen U.S. Coral Reef Task Force awards were presented to organizations or individuals for outstanding outreach and education, management, scientific advancement of knowledge, and community-level participation.

A Presidential Executive Order established the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force in 1998 to lead U.S. efforts to preserve and protect coral reef ecosystems. Through the coordinated efforts of its members, including representatives of 12 federal agencies, the governors of seven states and territories, and the leaders of the Freely Associated States, the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force has helped lead U.S. efforts to protect and manage valuable coral reef ecosystems in the U.S. and internationally. NOAA and Department of Interior co-chair the Task Force.

NOAA, an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with our federal partners and nearly 60 countries to develop a global Earth observation network that is as integrated as the planet it observes.

On the Web:

NOAA - <http://www.noaa.gov>

U.S. Coral Reef Task Force - <http://www.coralreef.gov>

Palau International Coral Reef Center – <http://www.picrc.org>