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Coastal Land Preserved on 15th Anniversary of Major Oil Spill off Puerto Rico *422 Acre San Miguel Natural Reserve Protects Beachfront, Habitat for Fish, Turtles and Birds*

On the 15th anniversary of a million-gallon oil spill that damaged the coastline of Puerto Rico, NOAA and partner organizations are celebrating the purchase of 152 acres to expand a coastal reserve near one of the areas hardest hit by the spill.

NOAA, the commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the Trust for Public Land announced today that 152 acres east of San Juan have been added to the San Miguel Natural Reserve to help compensate the public for lost recreational beach use and injured natural resources for an extended period after the Berman Oil Spill on Jan. 7, 1994.

The purchase of this land expands the San Miguel Natural Reserve to 422 acres, an area the size of 317 football fields, and contributes to a multi-year effort to create the Northeast Ecological Corridor, one of the Caribbean's last great unprotected areas.

"Expanding this coastal treasure of beach, mangroves, wetlands and forests protects the health of our coasts and provides the people of Puerto Rico with a wonderful place to swim, fish, hike and enjoy the beauty of the ocean," said Patricia Montanio, director of the NOAA Office of Habitat Conservation.

The San Miguel Natural Reserve is a mosaic of coastal habitats including near shore coral reefs, more than a mile of beachfront, intertidal areas, wetlands, coastal dry forests, mangroves, the confluence of two rivers and the remnants of a 19th century hacienda used for sugar cane farming. The reserve is home to 16 federally listed threatened and endangered species, including the endangered leatherback turtle which nests here.

"Preserving this site provides a continuous stretch of protected coastal shoreline, preventing the fragmentation of critical habitat," said Mildred Ramos Majoros, The Trust for Public Land's project manager for Puerto Rico. "It also ensures that publicly accessible coastal lands and waters are not privately developed and will continue to provide recreational areas to boat, swim, and fish."

The expansion of San Miguel Natural Reserve completes a project begun in 2007 when the Trust for Public Land purchased the first 270 acres to create the reserve. The reserve is one of a series of projects by NOAA, the National Park Service and the commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Funding for these projects comes in part from a \$9.7 million court settlement with the parties responsible for the spill.

The 1994 spill occurred when the *Morris J. Berman*, a 302-foot-long, 90-foot-wide barge, carrying 1.5 million gallons of number 6 fuel oil, ran aground near San Juan, releasing nearly a million gallons of oil into coastal waters.

Other projects including creation of a coral reef trail and restoration of several historic forts in San Juan that were damaged in the spill are also pending.

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