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CONTACT: Cheva Heck, (305) 292-0311

Local Partnership Takes Seagrass Awareness Month Statewide

Key West –An initiative that started in the Florida Keys spread statewide this year as Governor Jeb Bush proclaimed March Seagrass Awareness Month, in recognition of the importance of seagrass habitat to Florida’s environment and economy. The proclamation fulfills a request from the Seagrass Outreach Partnership, a Florida Keys-based coalition that includes local, state and federal agencies, conservation organizations and commercial and recreational fishing groups. In the proclamation, Governor Bush notes that Florida’s seagrass habitat supported a commercial fish and shellfish catch worth an estimated \$112 million in 1999. "Protecting seagrass habitat makes good sense for Florida, not just environmentally, but economically," said Governor Bush. "Our 2.5 million acres of seagrass help to support a healthy manatee population and produce the fresh seafood, clear waters and world-class diving and snorkeling that draw visitors to our state from around the world." Locally, Monroe County has declared its third annual Seagrass Awareness Month. "Like many, I used to take seagrass for granted, but I’ve come to realize that seagrass habitat is the rudimentary building block for the marine life that supports our tourism- and commercial fishing-based economy," said Monroe County Mayor George Neugent. "During Seagrass Awareness Month, I encourage residents and visitors to learn more about the environmental and economic importance of seagrass and how they can help protect it." Seagrass is a flowering plant that lives underwater. It occurs in coastal areas throughout Florida. Because it needs sunlight to survive, seagrass is found in relatively clear, shallow water. Seagrass beds serve as nurseries for juvenile fish, lobster, crabs and shrimp that later move offshore. They provide homes for threatened and endangered species such as the queen conch and the Bahama star. Larger animals, such as manatees, turtles, sharks and rays, forage in the seagrass, feeding on the plants themselves or on the smaller creatures that live there. Many birds, such as herons, roseate spoonbills and osprey, feed in the grass flats. Seagrass also helps to maintain water quality, serving as a filter and anchoring sediments. Declining water quality and chronic damage by boaters pose major threats to seagrass beds in the Florida Keys. In Monroe County, scars from boat propellers have damaged 30,000 acres of seagrass, according to a 1995 report by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. These scars may take years to heal, and some may never heal. Learning to identify shallow water, using charts and other navigational aids and operating only in more than three feet of water are several ways boaters can avoid damaging seagrass. "While boating-related damage is not the only threat to Florida’s seagrass habitat, it’s a problem that we can easily prevent by spreading the word about how to boat responsibly," said Mary Tagliareni, education coordinator for the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and Seagrass Outreach Partnership chair. In advance of Seagrass Awareness Month, the Seagrass Outreach partnership distributed more than one hundred CDs to a variety of groups around the

state to jump-start local seagrass awareness campaigns. Among the contents are sample fact sheets, radio public service announcements, press releases, seagrass photos and a word puzzle for children. Here in Monroe County, the Seagrass Outreach Partnership will staff a booth at the Kids Carnival at Camp Sawyer on West Summerland Key on March 10th. During March, episodes of the television show *Waterways*, which airs Mondays and Fridays at 7:30 p.m. on AT & T Channel Nineteen, will focus on techniques for shallow water boating, the impacts of vessel groundings and seagrass restoration techniques. A seagrass awareness presentation will air on Monroe County Government's Channel 16, and local cinemas will feature seagrass awareness messages.