



Minerals Management Service

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News Release

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MMS Study Assesses Hurricane Impacts on Northern Gulf of Mexico Coral Reefs and Communities

Post-Hurricane Assessment Study provides baseline for future review

NEW ORLEANS -- The Department of the Interior's Minerals Management Service (MMS) recently concluded a study that gives new insight into the effects Hurricane Rita had on the Gulf of Mexico's important coral reefs and banks in and around the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary.

The \$357,000 study, entitled [*Post-Hurricane Assessment of Sensitive Habitats of the Flower Garden Banks Vicinity*](#), provided an understanding of hurricane impacts, characterized the condition of the banks, and created a baseline for future assessment.

"Protecting marine resources is an important part of the MMS mission and it's essential for MMS to identify and assess any damage to these valuable habitats," said MMS Director Liz Birnbaum. "The findings from this study enhance our ability to make informed management decisions as we continue our efforts to protect this ecosystem."

In September 2005, Hurricane Rita passed over more than 22 separate banks located about 100 miles offshore Texas. These banks comprise a network of sensitive habitats forming a complex ecosystem that supports Caribbean reef organisms.

Field work for the study was conducted by PBS&J Ecological Sciences in a cooperative effort with the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, taking place at the East Flower Garden Bank and four additional banks near the Sanctuary - Sonnier, McGrail, Geyer, and Bright Banks.

Results show different levels of disturbance at each bank. Sonnier Bank suffered a loss of live coral and sponge habitat but is recovering, while no obvious hurricane damage was apparent at McGrail, Geyer, and Bright Banks. Geyer and Bright Banks may have recovered from any minor impacts it suffered, while McGrail Bank may have been protected by its depth of 148 ft.

The full report is available on the MMS Web site at www.mms.gov.

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