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Contact: Connie Barclay
(301)713-2370
Kim Amendola
(727)551-5707

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CORAL REEF RESTORATION EFFORTS FOLLOW SHIP GROUNDING IN PUERTO RICO

'Threatened' Coral Species Affected

Emergency restoration efforts are underway in Puerto Rico following the grounding of the 748-foot oil tanker *Margara* along the south coast of Puerto Rico April 27. Scientists have identified 8,500 square meters of impacted reef, including a relatively large thicket of *Acropora cervicornis*, or Staghorn coral, which was recently listed as 'threatened' by the NOAA Fisheries Service under the Endangered Species Act.

The emergency restoration work at the site is focused on the time-sensitive task of securing salvaged corals with underwater cement, rebuilding portions of the impacted reef and removing toxic anti-fouling paint from the site. These efforts began July 24 and are expected to continue for three to six months.

M/T Margara, flagged in the Cayman Islands, ran aground approximately two miles off the southwestern coast of Puerto Rico. The initial grounding and subsequent vessel removal efforts crushed and buried a significant amount of reef and dislodged thousands of corals along the edges of the impact. No oil was spilled.

"Coral reefs constantly face a barrage of threats, and it is of paramount importance that we protect and restore them through concentrated, skilled and informed methods," said retired Navy Vice Adm. Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Ph.D., Undersecretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere, and NOAA administrator. "This reef and all the species that call this habitat 'home' will be here for years to come as a result of the cooperative work between NOAA and our partners in Puerto Rico."

Rapid response by NOAA, the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (PRDNER), and the Responsible Party resulted in the salvage of thousands of pieces of hard and soft coral from the edges of impacted areas, along with more than 1,000 fragments of the ESA-listed *Acropora cervicornis.* An unusually high concentration of this species is present at the site.

Because of the size of the impact, the quality of the reef and the variety of species present, the *Margara* incident may be one of the most significant coral groundings ever in the United States.

The restoration effort is expected to restore a portion of the coral reef damaged by the grounding. However, additional primary and compensatory restoration may also be necessary in the future.

More

“Due in large part to excellent and unprecedented cooperation between the trustees and the responsible party, we have seen significant progress in stabilizing injured corals,” said Craig Lilyestrom, director of the Marine Resources division of PRDNER. “We are underway with a significant effort to quantify and restore corals within the impacted area. We are confident that we will be able to achieve restoration of many of the important species that were damaged.”

Recognizing the gravity of the damage done to coral reefs by ship groundings, both houses of Congress have introduced bills (S. 1390 & H.R. 5622) to reauthorize the Coral Reef Conservation Act (CRCA) that highlight the need to address this serious issue. Both bills allow NOAA to use funds appropriated under the Act to take direct action to prevent or minimize impacts to coral reefs from vessel impacts, including vessel removal and emergency reef restabilization. Funding appropriated under the CRCA is administered by NOAA's Coral Reef Conservation Program.

NOAA personnel are collaborating on this case through the Damage Assessment, Remediation, and Restoration Program (DARRP). NOAA created DARRP to provide permanent expertise to handle injuries to NOAA coastal and marine trustee resources. DARRP is a multi-disciplinary team of NOAA scientists, economists, restoration experts and attorneys that works cooperatively with all affected interests to assess injuries and implement restoration.

DARRP regularly convenes industry, government and conservation groups to identify methods for improving resource damage assessment, reducing costs, and restoring resources faster and more effectively. The cooperative framework offers industry a practical way to resolve pollution liability while NOAA fulfills its responsibilities as a natural resource trustee for coastal and marine resources.

In 2007, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, celebrates 200 years of science and service to the nation. From the establishment of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson, to the formation of the Weather Bureau and the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries in the 1870s, much of America's scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by 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 its federal partners and more than 60 countries to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes.

The Department of Natural and Environmental Resources of Puerto Rico is responsible for the management of Natural Reserves and Environmental Resources. Through the passage of Puerto Rican Law 147 (Coral Reef Conservation Act of 1999), the Commonwealth has elevated the concern for and protection of coral reefs as a natural and protected resource, vital to sustaining fish and biodiversity within state waters.

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