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U. S. CORAL REEF TASK FORCE LAUNCHES NEW CLIMATE CHANGE EFFORT *Also Announces Cooperative Conservation Plan for International Year of the Reef*

During its biannual meeting this week in Pago Pago, American Samoa, the U. S. Coral Reef Task Force announced the formation of a new climate change working group and endorsed an action plan for the International Year of the Reef 2008 that will involve government and non-government partners in conservation.

The new climate change working group is charged with developing best practices to help local resource managers minimize the impact of climate-induced stresses like coral bleaching while better educating the public about the impacts of climate change on the health and survival of reef resources. Components of the decision also called for developing bleaching response plans for each U.S. state and territory with reefs, and assessing what expertise and resources federal agencies have to mitigate risk and damage.

The Task Force further called on members and partners to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and affirmed the role that regional networks of marine protected areas can play in protecting ecological connectivity among islands in the face of potential future losses that may result due to climate change.

"This new climate change working group will be composed of experts from across the 19-agency Task Force in climate science, coral bleaching and management actions relevant to the coral reef and climate nexus," said Timothy Keeney, deputy assistant secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and Task Force co-chair. "We recognize and are acting to address the vulnerability of island and coastal communities to changes in shoreline protection, fisheries and tourism as a result of climate change effects to coral reefs."

The creation of the climate change group is considered a major new step for the Task Force, but one that builds on several past resolutions and the 2005 release of *The Reef Manager's Guide to Coral Bleaching*. The *Reef Manager's Guide* provides information on the causes and consequences of coral bleaching, and helps managers understand and plan for bleaching events.

As part of this effort, the Task Force hosted a special session on the health of coral reef ecosystems in a changing climate, drawing from the regional and international expertise to highlight common challenges and management needs.

"The critical importance of addressing climate change issues sooner rather than later was clearly articulated in yesterday's panel and subsequent discussion," said American Samoa Governor Togiola Tulafono, local meeting host and author of the recent climate change statement that prompted the Task Force to take additional action. "As Wayne Nastri, U. S. Environmental Protection Agency Regional Administrator for Region 9 so eloquently stated, we need to begin immediately to put our words into action to address those opportunities within our mandates and abilities."

The American Samoa Governor also announced the passage of a territorial Executive Order addressing climate change on August 23. The Executive Order takes a proactive approach by mandating the American Samoa government agencies and departments make short- and long-term commitments to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

Climate change discussions will continue next week as 30 local experts from U.S. Pacific states and territories, Fiji, and Western Samoa meet in Pago Pago, American Samoa to share strategies and learn how to use tools that predict where coral bleaching will occur, measure coral reef resilience, and assess the socioeconomic impacts of climate damage. The workshop, part of global series, will be hosted by NOAA, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, and The Nature Conservancy, who partnered with the World Conservation Congress (IUCN) and others to release the *Reef Manager's Guide*.

This meeting has showcased what can be done to conserve coral reefs," said Nikola Pula, Director of the Department of the Interior's Office of Insular Affairs and acting co-chair of the Task Force. "As a native Samoan, I am extremely impressed with what has been accomplished here in American Samoa over the last several years, and with the initiatives announced at this meeting. Throughout the Pacific Islands, the melding of traditional practices and institutions with modern science is giving us conservation efforts that are supported by the local communities."

In response to the declaration of 2008 as the International Year of the Reef (IYOR) by the International Coral Reef Initiative, the Task Force also adopted an IYOR Action Plan. The action plan features new and strengthened partnerships across the government and non-government communities to more effectively reach the American public with coordinated messages about coral reef decline and the role individuals, organizations and businesses can play in helping to halt that decline.

The Task Force passed two additional resolutions. The first defined and launched 'phase two' of a highly successful Local Action Strategy initiative, which created three-year plans for local action that implemented hundreds of targeted conservation projects worth millions of dollars. The second resolution recognized a new strategic plan and charter for the U.S. All Islands Coral Reef Committee, which represents the Governors and Executive branches of the states, commonwealths, territories and Freely Associated States possessing coral reefs.

In keeping with the meeting's theme, Science and Culture Bridging Management, the Task Force meeting featured in-depth sessions on enhancing management strategies through incorporation of traditional knowledge and regional approaches to managing coral reefs across political boundaries at the ecosystem level. Public workshops focused on federal grant and technical assistance opportunities for the region, as well as on methods for determining the economic value of coral reef ecosystems to protect economic benefits and enhance political support for reef conservation.

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.

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On the Web:

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

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

Department of the Interior: <http://www.doi.gov>