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## **NOAA FISHERIES PROPOSES FIRST LISTING OF CORALS UNDER THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT**

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service announced today that it will propose listing staghorn (*Acropora cervicornis*) and elkhorn (*Acropora palmata*) corals as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This would be the first listing of any coral species as threatened or endangered under the ESA.

"These formerly abundant corals have remained at low levels without noticeable recovery, and in cases where we have targeted monitoring data, they continue to decline," said retired Navy Vice Admiral Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Jr., Ph.D., under secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA administrator. "Threats to these species include physical damage from human activities and hurricanes, as well as disease and temperature-induced bleaching."

NOAA's Coral Program monitors abundance and disease outbreaks of corals, funds research on population genetics and restoration techniques, conducts on-the-ground conservation activities, and participates actively with its partners on the United States Coral Reef Task Force. The Task Force oversees the implementation of the 1998 Executive Order 13089 on Coral Reef Protection. Despite ongoing domestic and international conservation efforts, staghorn and elkhorn corals continue to decline and face many threats that are not being adequately mitigated.

"Our scientists are currently conducting research to understand causes of disease and temperature-induced bleaching to these ecologically important coral reefs," said Dr. Bill Hogarth, director of NOAA Fisheries Service. "They work to restore reefs that are damaged from hurricanes and humans, but this is not sufficient to restore the staghorn and elkhorn corals to healthy levels."

NOAA Fisheries Service today signed a Federal Register notice, announcing its decision to propose a listing for these species. NOAA Fisheries Service will publish a proposed rule to list the two species as threatened in a subsequent Federal Register notice. Public comments will be solicited and reviewed. NOAA will also coordinate with state and territorial managers throughout the process.

NOAA Deputy Assistant Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere Timothy R.E. Keeney announced the proposed listing today during the 13th biannual meeting of the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force held in Washington, D.C. Keeney is co-chair of the task force.

The finding announced today is in response to a March 4, 2004 petition from the Center for Biological Diversity, requesting NOAA Fisheries Service to list three acroporid species as threatened or endangered under the ESA: staghorn coral, elkhorn coral, and fused-staghorn coral (*Acropora prolifera*), a hybrid of the elkhorn and staghorn corals. NOAA Fisheries Service

conducted a status review, and determined that staghorn and elkhorn corals warrant listing as threatened under the ESA. The fused-staghorn coral is naturally rare because it is a hybrid that cannot interbreed sexually, and it does not qualify as a species under the ESA.

In the Western Atlantic, these branching corals are found in shallow water on reefs throughout the Bahamas, Florida and the Caribbean. They grow best in clear water free from excess nutrients, runoff or algal blooms. These delicate corals are particularly sensitive to sediment, as they are among the least effective of the reef-building corals at trapping and removing sediment from their surface.

Prolonged exposure to high water temperatures and other stresses may lead to bleaching, which is the loss of zooxanthellae (*symbiotic algae*) from the coral. These algae give corals their color, provide food to the coral, and remove some of the corals waste products. If these stresses continue, the corals will die.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of the nation's coastal and marine resources.

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