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International Community Does Not Adopt Proposal to Protect Rare Red and Pink Corals

Tom Strickland, Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks for the Department of the Interior and head of the U.S. delegation for the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), expressed disappointment for the decision by the Parties not to adopt the U.S. proposal to list 31 species of red and pink corals under Appendix II of the Convention, which would have regulated the international trade in these vulnerable species. The proposal, cosponsored by the European Union, was disapproved by a vote of 64 in support, 59 opposed and 10 abstentions.

“Although the proposal did not gain the two-thirds majority of votes necessary to be adopted, the U.S. is encouraged by the fact that the majority of the Parties voted in support of the proposal,” said Strickland. “History shows that it often takes several CoP meetings for proposals to garner enough support for adoption. We will continue to work in international forums to heighten protections for all coral species.”

Red and pink coral have been over-harvested for international trade in many parts of the world. These corals are from the Coralliidae family. They are often made into jewelry and carved into decorative items and have been traded for centuries. Increasing evidence is also showing that all corals, including Coralliidae, are vulnerable to the effects of climate change and warming ocean temperatures appear to be having a detrimental effect. No countries currently have comprehensive management plans for these coral species and a CITES listing would have encouraged other countries to develop these plans.

“We are disappointed that the proposal was not adopted, but we will continue to work with the international community toward ensuring the trade of red and pink corals is managed in a sustainable manner,” said Jane Lubchenco, Ph.D., Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator. “The U.S.

government is grateful to the other nations who joined us in the effort to protect these corals.”

Although they resemble plants, corals are colonies of small, soft-bodied animals called polyps that secrete a hard, calcium carbonate exoskeleton. This exoskeleton is the part of the animal out of which the carvings are made. Their slow growth rate and low reproductive capacity, combined with their high market value, make these corals highly vulnerable to overexploitation.