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Preparing for Sea Changes in Florida

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TALLAHASSEE (May 28, 2008) - Florida could, and should, take specific steps immediately to deal with the anticipated - and the already occurring - effects of global climate change on beaches and marine life, a group of nationally and internationally recognized environmental organizations urged in a report issued today.

The state is in a unique position to set an example for the rest of the nation and world by following the recommendations set forth in "Preparing for a Sea Change in Florida: A Strategy to Cope with the Impacts of Global Warming on the State's Coastal and Marine Systems," said members of the Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition, which prepared the report.

The coalition's comprehensive recommendations include specific steps that may be taken to protect coastal and marine ecosystems against stresses associated with higher temperatures, ocean acidification, rising sea levels and extreme weather.

The coalition - whose scientists and experts are active in global warming issues in Florida and around the globe - includes the Caribbean Conservation Corporation, Environmental Defense Fund, Gulf Restoration Network, Natural Resources Defense Council, National Wildlife Federation, Ocean Conservancy, Reef Relief, and The Surfrider Foundation.

"Warmer ocean waters kill coral and harm fish populations," explained Patty Glick, the report's primary author and Senior Global Warming Specialist with the National Wildlife Federation. "Higher acidity inhibits corals and other marine animals from forming their protective skeletons," she continued.

"Rising sea levels erode beaches, causing saltwater intrusion into fresh water supplies, and killing coastal marshes.

"Extreme weather events, including floods, droughts, and tropical storms, lead to more polluted runoff into estuaries, and damage to coastal habitats and property."

To reduce the effects of higher ocean temperatures, the report recommends that Florida and federal agencies work to restore the health of coastal and marine ecosystems to enhance their ability to cope with the stress of climate change. To deal with acidification, Florida must be a leader in efforts to minimize global warming through major reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

To prepare for rising sea levels, the report recommends that Florida and federal agencies discourage development in vulnerable areas, and work at restoring and protecting natural buffers such as coastal wetlands and near-shore reefs.

The report also recommends that Florida prepare for extreme weather events, such as heavy downpours and droughts, through better protection and restoration of shoreline vegetation and wetlands, and by upgrading stormwater management to account for more frequent and heavier rainstorms, increasing water-use efficiency through conservation, and recycling treated wastewater for industrial use and irrigation.

"Florida can and must be a leader not only in curbing the build up of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, but also in implementing smart, common-sense coastal and ocean policies that will help preserve the state's natural coastal and ocean heritage," biologist Dr. Sylvia A. Earle, a former chief scientist of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, observes in the preface to the report.

"This guide, put together with careful thought by an impressive coalition of conservation organizations, lays out a roadmap for state policymakers to follow in preserving [the state's] heritage. The pathway is clear, what is needed now is action."

Individual members of the coalition echoed that view.

"We have a moral obligation to change our relationship with the planet," said David White, Regional Director of Ocean Conservancy. "Adaptation to climate change will require significant investments in research, education, industry and government, but is within our capacity as a global society."

Gulf Restoration Network Florida Director Joe Murphy added, "Protecting places like Florida's Nature Coast from sea level rise with creative adaptation techniques and strategic land acquisition offers us an opportunity to assure future generations that we had the grace and wisdom to respond to the crisis before us."

Other coalition members drew attention to how Florida's world-class beaches and marine environments generate tens of billions of dollars each year from tourism and recreation. And how the same beaches are singularly critical to the survival of other species.

"The thin ribbon of sand that surrounds the Florida peninsula is the most important sea turtle nesting habitat in the United States," said Gary Appelson, Sea Turtle Survival League Advocacy Coordinator, at the Caribbean Conservation Corporation.

There are restoration efforts already underway to offset the harmful effects of pollution, coastal development, and over-fishing, the coalition report notes. But the future of coastal and ocean resources now largely depend on how quickly and comprehensively state and federal officials move to protect Florida against the already occurring, and the looming, effects of global warming.

With Florida's human population growing fast, proactively confronting this challenge is of paramount importance. Florida has heated up by about two degrees Fahrenheit since the 1960s.

Average temperatures will keep rising in the coming decades, with average low temperatures in winter increasing three to 10 degrees, and average high temperatures in summer increasing three to seven degrees.

Global warming does not just mean hotter weather, as the report makes clear. And the effects are already upon us.

"During our lifetime, acidification and warming sea temperatures could eliminate coral reefs in Florida as we know them," said Paul G. Johnson, president of Reef Relief.

Added Surfrider Foundation Regional Manager Ericka D'Avanzo, "We can turn the tide by implementing common sense solutions to reverse these effects and insure that Florida's future includes healthy coral reefs, sustainable beaches, and abundant fisheries."

The Sea Change report's recommendations can provide that impetus. If the state acts now to ensure the recovery of its beaches, ocean, and the Gulf of Mexico, such bold environmental leadership could stimulate critical changes in national and global environmental policies, coalition members said.

"We want our children and our grandchildren to be able to enjoy what we love about the ocean - from fishing trips to beach vacations and seafood dinners," said Sarah Chasis, Ocean Initiative Director of the Natural Resources Defense Council. "This report is a blueprint for protecting our oceans from global warming. The longer we wait the more expensive and difficult it is going to be to fix later."

By assembling the nation's first comprehensive set of guidelines for dealing with the demonstrated effects of climate change on a coastal state, the Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition has accomplished a first, Environmental Defense Fund Climate Director Gerald Karnas said.

"This is a real prescription for surviving the onrushing years of global warming," said Karnas. "The whole world is going to be watching what is done here. This is the frontline in the war on global warming."

To view the complete report, please go to www.flcoastalandocean.org/PreparingforaSeaChange The Coalition is a collaborative

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