



Coral comment deadline is May 6

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More protection for two species being considered

Conservation groups and commercial fishermen agree on a key element of coral protection: Focus on water quality.

"It is clearly the human interference, particularly diseases, sediment and algal grow ... that are the greatest inhibitors to the species recovery," members of the Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition wrote in remarks to the federal government.

Elkhorn and staghorn corals have been declared threatened species under the Endangered Species Act and, as such, deserve protection of the corals' "critical habitat."

Those waters essentially all waters in the Keys that provide a rocky surface for the corals to grow on, down to about 120 feet in depth.

What that designation means to Keys waters has not been determined.

Staff with the National Marine Fisheries Service will take written comment on the move to protect critical habitat until May 6.

A team working with the agency is preparing a recovery plan for elkhorn and staghorn corals expected to be released late this year.

Any new regulatory action considered under the critical-habitat proposals would have to go through the public hearing process.

Waters along the Florida coast through Palm Beach County also have been designated as critical habitat, along with waters in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"We have a court-ordered date for finalizing critical habitat for these species, which is Nov. 30, 2008," Fisheries Service specialist wrote Sarah Heberling in an e-mail.

"The recovery plan serves as a road map for species recovery - it lays out where we need to go and how best to get there through prioritized, site-specific recovery actions," she wrote.

The Coastal and Ocean Coalition - which includes eight groups, including Reef Relief and The Ocean Conservancy - said it wants any recovery project to address major sources of pollution, including sewage outfalls, dredging and filling, and agricultural runoff.

The Florida Keys Commercial Fishermen's Association pointed out in its comments that "NOAA biologists have estimated that more than 90 percent of [branching] corals have been lost because of 'bleaching due to rising sea temperatures, tropical storm damage and disease.'"

That means the government should tackle those problems before focusing on relatively small impacts like those from commercial fishing, noted the fishermen's group.

"The process of fishing commercially is no more damaging than the actions of user groups which incidentally 'take' corals by direct human contact, trash/debris, vessels and anchors," wrote executive director Scott Zimmerman.

Fishermen and commercial dive operators are wary of potential regulations that could seek to limit access to some areas of coral growth.