

The Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition

Caribbean Conservation Corporation & Sea Turtle Survival League •
Reef Relief • Gulf Restoration Network • Natural Resources Defense Council •
The Surfrider Foundation • The Ocean Conservancy • Environmental Defense Fund

April 1, 2008

Secretary Michael Sole
Florida Department of Environmental Protection
3900 Commonwealth Boulevard, MS 10
Tallahassee, FL 32399-3000

Re: DEP Investigation of Seagrass Bed Damage by SunCruz

Dear Secretary Sole,

We at the Florida Coastal and Oceans Coalition wish to express our strong concerns regarding the situation occurring off the Pasco-Hernando County coast involving the SunCruz Corporation and the impacts of their operations on vital seagrass beds.

Recently the *St. Petersburg Times* published an article (attached) with compelling and mounting evidence that SunCruz vessels are directly damaging and degrading large areas of seagrass off the coasts of Pasco and Hernando Counties. We understand that this issue has been under review and investigation by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection since late 2007. It is imperative that the Department conclude this investigation expeditiously, begin the immediate process of stopping this activity, establish a restoration strategy, and fine/punish those responsible.

Florida's Nature Coast, stretching from just north of Tampa Bay to the western Wakulla County line, is one of the Gulf of Mexico's last wild coastlines. As you know, it is one of the largest relatively uninterrupted continuous coastal wetland ecosystems left anywhere in the Gulf. The greater Big Bend seagrass beds, stretching along this coast, comprise some of the most healthy and ecologically productive seagrass beds left on the planet. These seagrass beds are essential to the health of numerous marine species and our recreational and commercial fisheries in Florida. It is unacceptable that a company, particularly one with the environmental track record of SunCruz, continues to damage and destroy these resources apparently on a regular basis.

We understand that your department's responsibilities are vast, and your work is never done. We appreciate the commitment that you bring to Florida's DEP in terms of your commitment to our coastal and ocean resources, and we applaud your leadership on issues ranging from coastal preservation to protecting freshwater flows into Apalachicola Bay. We urge you to bring that commitment of coastal conservation to this

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issue and quickly and decisively act to ensure that valuable seagrass beds, the shared property of all Floridians held in public trust, are not further damaged by this company.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter. We would greatly appreciate your direction to DEP staff that we be apprised of its actions in this matter, including development and implementation of a restoration plan for the seagrass beds in question.

Sincerely,

Gary Appelson – Caribbean Conservation Corp.

Sarah Chasis, J.D. – Natural Resources Defense Council

Ericka D'Avanzo – Surfrider Foundation

Jerry Karnas – Environmental Defense Fund

Paul G. Johnson – Reef Relief

Joe Murphy – Gulf Restoration Network

David White, J.D. – Ocean Conservancy

cc: Charlie Crist, Governor, State of Florida
Distribution