

**Coral Management Committee Report  
October 21, 2019  
Dr. Tom Frazer – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab N, No. 1**) as provided and approved the minutes (**Tab N, No. 2**) of the October 2018 meeting as written.

***Agenda Item IV: Coral Reef Conservation Program Update (Tab N, No. 4)***

Council staff presented updates on products and services produced under the current NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program grant (2017 – 2020 cycle). The Committee asked if staff was planning to disseminate information on the status of stony coral tissue loss disease which is currently affecting shallow water corals in the Florida Keys as well as other reefs in the Caribbean. Staff referenced the current efforts undertaken by the Florida state agencies based on a presentation by Florida Wildlife Research Institute staff at the most recent Joint Coral SSC, Coral AP, and Shrimp AP meeting, as well as the opportunity to receive additional status updates on the spread of the disease.

The Committee inquired about the environmental variables that would be used to develop a model to predict the distribution of corals that might provide insight into the effects of climate change on corals. Staff provided a list of the variables and they can be found at the end of this report. The variables were sourced from publicly available environmental databases. Source grid size ranged between 30 arc second to 0.25 degree and all variables were compiled into a uniform grid of 5 km<sup>2</sup> covering the marine ecoregion area of the Gulf of Mexico. Staff explained that the model mostly uses satellite-based environmental data, which limits their application to shallow water corals. Other types of data would have to be used to develop a similar model focused on deep-sea corals. Staff explained also that some of the analyses are restricted due to data sharing agreements with partnering agencies. Finally, it was noted that the variables employed in the models may change as staff fine-tunes the model and more information becomes available.

***Agenda Item V: Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Expansion Update (Tab N, No. 5)***

Mr. Schmahl gave an update on the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary (FGBNMS) expansion. The current FGBNMS covers 56 mi<sup>2</sup>. The most recent Sanctuary Advisory Committee recommendation would result in an expansion to 160 mi<sup>2</sup>. Regulations within the areas designated as No Activity Zones (NAZs) include the prohibition of anchoring by any kind of vessel. The use of conventional hook and line and bandit rigs is allowed. The objective of the regulations in place is to protect bottom communities from physical disturbances. The proposal is currently under inter-agency review, and a proposed rule is expected to be announced soon.

The Committee suggested that language related to transit regulations within the NAZs be clarified; specifically those regulations related to fishing gear on a vessel. A similar recommendation was made at the most recent Joint Coral SSC, Coral AP, and Shrimp AP meeting. A letter with this recommendation will be submitted to the FGBNMS.

***Agenda Item VI: Status of Coral Amendment 9***

The notice of availability of Coral Amendment 9 was released on September 26<sup>th</sup>, and the release of the proposed rule is expected to be published soon. Both, the notice of availability and the proposed rule, will have a public comment period and all comments will be addressed in the final rule.

***Agenda Item VII: Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Management Review (Tab N, No. 6a)***

Ms. Beth Dieveney presented the proposed changes to the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS) boundary that are included in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the Restoration Blueprint, and indicated there is an opportunity for the Council’s consultation on the proposed fishery regulations. The FKNMS is currently at the first stage of the consultation process for this DEIS, with a deadline for public comments on January 31, 2020. The proposed FKNMS boundary includes a southern expansion that would align with existing zones designated as “areas to be avoided”, which prevent navigation of large vessels within those areas. In addition, the proposal includes an expansion of the western boundary which would encompass the waters surrounding the Tortugas Ecological Reserves North and South. The FKNMS currently has 57 marine zones with regulatory actions. Each of the proposed alternatives proposes to add additional marine zones with various fishing, transit, or anchoring regulations. For the Pulley Ridge unit, the proposed Alternative 4 would maintain the fishing regulations proposed in Coral Amendment 9, but would include an additional action of no anchoring regardless of vessel type. Current regulations stipulate no anchor by fishing vessels.

The Committee asked about language in the DEIS that applies to private use. Ms. Dieveney explained that private use refers to variety of activities and uses by the local business entities within adjacent communities. Following recommendations by the Shrimp AP and Ms. Bosarge, the FKNMS staff is working on including additional layers to their interactive map, which would allow users to access the coordinates of the proposed marine zones, and fathom lines on the map.

There was concern regarding making Council recommendations based on available Shrimp ELB data as these data come from a subset of the shrimp fleet, and are not likely to be representative of shrimping activity within the areas in and around the FKNMS.

***Agenda Item VIII: Remaining Items from the Joint Coral SSC, Coral AP, and Shrimp AP Meeting (Tab N, No. 5a)***

The Shrimp AP passed a motion to request a stock assessment on Kemp's Ridley sea turtles, given the apparent decline in nesting activity of this species. Additional discussion about this motion occurred during the Administrative and Budget Committee meeting (Tab G, No. 4a). Finally, discussion of the proposed motion by the Coral AP and Coral SSC to begin work on Coral Amendment 10 was deferred, because of time constraints, to Full Council.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.

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*Environmental variables considered for the climate change model and coral distribution*

- Depth
- Euphotic depth
- Surface primary productivity
- Seabed salinity
- Seabed temperature
- Slope
- Surface current
- Surface wind speed
- Surface potential organic carbon
- Surface pH
- Seabed dissolved oxygen concentration
- Surface total suspended matter concentration