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NOAA Report States Half of U.S. Coral Reefs In "Poor" or "Fair" Condition

Fort Lauderdale, Fla.— Nearly half of U.S. coral reef ecosystems are considered to be in "poor" or "fair" condition according to a new NOAA analysis of the health of coral reefs under U.S. jurisdiction.

The report issued today, *The State of Coral Reef Ecosystems of the United States and Pacific Freely Associated States: 2008*, says that the nation's coral reef ecosystems, particularly those adjacent to populated areas, continue to face intense human-derived threats from coastal development, fishing, sedimentation and recreational use. Even the most remote reefs are subject to threats such as marine debris, illegal fishing and climate-related effects of coral bleaching, disease and ocean acidification.

The report was released by NOAA at the 11th International Coral Reef Symposium in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. More than 270 scientist and managers working throughout the Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean, the Atlantic and Pacific authored the 15 jurisdiction-specific chapters of the report. The scientists graded the coral ecosystems on a five tier scale: excellent, good, fair, poor and unknown.

"NOAA's coral program has made some significant progress since it was established 10 years ago, but we need to redouble our efforts to protect this critical resource," said retired Navy Vice Admiral Conrad C. Lautenbacher Jr., Ph.D., under secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA administrator.

The 569-page document details coral reef conditions in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Navassa Island, southeast Florida, the Florida Keys, Flower Garden Banks, the Main Hawaiian Islands, the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, American Samoa, the Pacific Remote Islands, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam and the Republic of Palau.

"The report shows that this is a global issue," said Tim Keeney, deputy assistant secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and co-chair of the United States Coral Reef Task Force. "While the report indicates reefs in general are healthier in the Pacific than the Atlantic, even remote reefs are subject to threats stemming from climate change as well as illegal fishing and marine debris."

The conditions of U.S. coral reefs have been declining for several decades according to the report's authors. As an indicator of this decline, since the last status report was released in

2005, two coral species -- Elkhorn and Staghorn corals --- have become the first corals ever listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

The 2008 report is the third in a series, representing an evolving effort to track the condition of coral reef ecosystems at both local and national scales. It was called for in the *National Coral Reef Action Strategy* (NCRAS) and was designed to address the primary threats, goals and objectives outlined in the NCRAS, the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000, and other guidance documents. NOAA's Center for Coastal Monitoring and Assessment's Biogeography Branch led the development and production of the report with support from NOAA's Coral Reef Conservation Program.

The State of Coral Reef Ecosystems of the United States and Pacific Freely Associated States: 2008 is available for free download at <http://ccma.nos.noaa.gov/stateofthereefs>.

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On the Web:

NOAA: <http://www.noaa.gov>

Status of US Coral Reefs Report: <http://ccma.nos.noaa.gov/stateofthereefs>.