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U.S. to close treacherous anchorage off Lauderdale

By David Fleshler

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Having been pounded for years by cargo ships running aground, the coral reefs off Fort Lauderdale will soon receive protection.

The Coast Guard announced Wednesday it will eliminate an anchorage that had allowed ships to halt for days off the beach north of Port Everglades, adjacent to the reefs. In storms, some ships have been blown toward shore, smashing coral, crushing sea fans and scouring other marine life from the rocky bottom. Other ships end up on the reefs through navigation errors.

"They've done tremendous damage," said Ken Banks, a reef expert with the Broward County Environmental Protection Department. "We've had numerous groundings occur in a small area."

The ships have used the anchorage to wait for a berth in the port or await orders to their next destination. About a dozen ships have grounded on the reefs since 1994, in addition to several others that dragged their anchors along the bottom.

In 2004, the freighter *Federal Pescadores* ran up on the reef, bulldozing thousands of square feet of reef. Divers found coral smashed to rubble and barrel sponges sheered off. The latest grounding took place last year, when the 645-foot freighter *Clipper Lasco*, on its way to France with a load of aluminum ore, gouged a 100-foot gash in the reef.

The groundings caused growing dismay among environmentalists and environmental officials, leading the Coast Guard to take action.

The Coast Guard plan will close Anchorage A, the strip of ocean running parallel to the beach, where swimmers and sunbathers often see a row of cargo ships motionless in the water. Located in water that's relatively shallow at 60 to 70 feet, this anchorage has been the source of nearly all the ships that ran aground over the past few years.

In its place, the Coast Guard will expand Anchorage B, located in deeper water. The plan will also prohibit ships from remaining in the anchorage more than 72 hours.

Environmental officials said the plan is a big step toward protecting a sensitive marine ecosystem.

"This should minimize the risk of groundings on the near-shore reef," Banks said.

Coast Guard Cmdr. Brian Gove said the Coast Guard worked closely with the shipping community and received no negative comments on the plan.

Ellen Kennedy, spokeswoman for Port Everglades, said the port was satisfied that the plan would protect the reefs without interfering with shipping.

"I think we've found a satisfactory solution," she said.

Richard Dodge, dean of Nova Southeastern's Oceanographic Center and executive director of the university's National Coral Reef Institute, who was involved in preparing the plan, said he was optimistic it would work although the reefs remained in danger so long as ships anchored anywhere near them.

"It's a great step, and I think everyone's encouraged," he said. "But I don't think they're going to solve it while there are still ships near the reefs. Accidents still happen and storms still happen."

The Coast Guard is accepting comments on the plan for the next 30 days at this address: U.S. Coast Guard Sector Miami, 100 MacArthur Causeway, Miami Beach, FL 33139, Attention: Lt. j.g. Christopher Svencer. After reviewing the comments and making any modifications in response to them, the Coast Guard will implement the new anchorage system.

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