



**22nd U.S. CORAL REEF TASK FORCE MEETING
Report of the U.S. All Islands Coral Reef Committee
Puerto Rico, November 3, 2009**

Hola, Hafa adai, Talofa, Aloha, and Good Day,

It is my great pleasure, on behalf of the U.S. All Islands Coral Reef Committee (AIC) to present this report on our activities and accomplishments since we last met in Washington D.C. in February 2009.

Earthquake and Tsunami in the Samoan Islands

We wish to express our deepest condolences from the AIC to our partners and friends in American Samoa, Samoa and Tonga, whose families are suffering from the tragic impacts of the recent tsunami. Our hearts, thoughts and prayers are with them all.

The impacts of the earthquake and tsunami have been devastating. We hope that together we can find ways to help with recovery and rebuilding the future for the people and communities who have suffered such extraordinary loss.

With natural disasters such as these, we need to develop initiatives to address mitigation of coral reef damage and clean up of marine debris caused by natural disasters. In 2006 the Injury Response Working Group recommended that the USCRTF follow up with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Stafford Act authority to address coral reef injury events associated with storms and other natural disasters.

We need to find ways to improve rapid response to natural disasters and restore natural systems, as island communities are dependent on these resources.

Interagency Ocean Policy Task Force

The AIC has submitted comments and recommendations to President Obama's Interagency Ocean Policy Task Force (IOPTF), led by CEQ, on its Interim Report which was released on September 10, 2009. We also provided comments on priorities for a National coastal and marine spatial planning (MSP) framework.

Recently, one of our AIC members, Lelei Peau, was invited to provide advice to the Task Force, with Pacific Island perspectives on partnerships and governance at the public meeting held in Honolulu, Hawai'i on September 29, 2009.

The AIC's recommendations included:

- Recognition of the vital role of states and territories in providing a National Policy for the Oceans, our Coasts and Great Lakes;

- Adopting a policy to support, protect and conserve coral reef ecosystems;
- Ensuring that the implementation of the National policy initiatives are adequately funded;
- Support for state and territorial representation on the proposed Governance Advisory Committee;
- Supporting state and territorial climate change initiatives; and
- Active collaboration with coastal states and territories to adopt a coastal and marine spatial planning framework that builds on existing efforts.

Stimulus Funding for Coral Reefs

The AIC jurisdictions were asked to submit coral reef restoration projects in February 2009. As a result, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 funded five large-scale projects related to coral reefs in the USVI, Florida, Hawai'i (two), and CNMI. These projects, with funds totaling \$15 million, will have major restorative impacts in four AIC member jurisdictions. The large funding levels awarded to these projects will significantly advance coral reef conservation efforts that are central to the AIC's mission.

The coral related funded projects were:

- *USVI Watershed Stabilization* (St. John and St. Croix, USVI) – \$2.7 million – This project will reduce sediment loading to coral reef habitats by implementing a variety of watershed management and stabilization techniques in 3 watersheds in St. John and St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands.
- *Threatened Coral Recovery and Restoration* (Florida and USVI) – \$3.3 million – This project is a large-scale, regional restoration effort aimed at aiding in the recovery of populations of threatened Acroporid coral on reefs in Florida and the U.S. Virgin Islands.
- *Maunalua Bay Reef Restoration* (Maunalua Bay, Hawaii) – \$3.4 million – This project will work to restore coral reefs through manual removal of invasive alien algae from 22 acres of nearshore waters
- *Pelekane Bay Watershed Restoration* (Pelekane Bay, Hawaii) – \$2.7 million – This project is a comprehensive approach to reducing land-based sediment inputs into Pelekane Bay coral reefs through erosion control, native revegetation, and limiting sediment transport.
- *LaoLao Bay Coastal Restoration* (LaoLao Beach, Saipan, CNMI) – \$2.9 million – In coordination with the grantee, NOAA will directly invest Recovery Act funds to restore Saipan's coral reefs by removing and addressing sources of upland sediment.

Local Action Strategies (LAS)

In previous reports to the USCRTF the AIC has consistently highlighted the need for improved communication and partnerships with federal agencies on the implementation of Local Action Strategies (LAS). After nearly ten years of working on LAS, strong partnerships with all federal agencies on the Task Force will help us see significant improvement in healthy coral reefs in our jurisdictions.

In February 2010, the AIC is planning to hold a Summit in Washington, D.C. where we will invite selected federal agencies to meet with us to explore ways to establish and strengthen partnerships.

We are pleased that at the last meeting of the USCRTF in Washington, D.C. in February, USDA Chief David White offered to explore ways to provide assistance to the jurisdictions. USDA/NRCS is now looking at developing partnerships using Farm Bill funds to address land based sources of pollution in a model project in the Guanica watershed in Puerto Rico. They will then identify projects in other jurisdictions in partnership with AIC members.

We fully encourage this initiative and look forward to hearing more from USDA about their proposal for an NGO Partnership Funding Initiative at this meeting.

While we have had some successes, an important challenge that we continue to face is the lack of capacity in the jurisdictions (including technical expertise, enforcement, hiring and retention of qualified staff). This remains a significant challenge to our efforts to effectively manage our coral reef resources.

I will now give you a brief update on the successes and challenges of the AIC members in implementing the LAS in the jurisdictions.

Updates from the Coral Jurisdictions

American Samoa

Successes

- Climate Change
 - Developing a three year action plan via the climate change local action strategy;
 - Implemented a government-wide hybrid vehicle policy;
 - Conducting socio-economic studies on perceptions/impacts;
 - Documented annual, multi-species mass coral bleaching events.
Possibly the first coral reefs in the world - a vision of things to come?
- Population Pressure
 - Established a Population Commission via the Governor's Executive Order to oversee territorial population activities;
 - Drafted Territorial Population Policy and once completed American Samoa will be the first US territory or state to have one.
 - The United States remains the only industrialized country without an official population policy;
 - Collaborating with national and regional NGOs on several projects, including a data users workshop.

Challenges

- There are no Universities or NGOs to assist with conservation efforts
- On island technical capacity remains limited.
- The recent tsunami has created significant environmental challenges related to water quality and marine debris.

CNMI

Successes

- Conservation action plan for Laolao Bay Watershed completed to address land-based sources of pollution which resulted in funding from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA).
- Fostering interest in resource management among local college students through internship program.

Challenges

- High staff turnovers
- Insufficient technical and enforcement capacity.

Florida

Successes

- Enacted the *Coral Reef Protection Act* on July 1, 2009. The new law raises awareness about damages associated with vessel impacts and authorizes penalties for coral reef injuries resulting from vessels anchoring, grounding and dragging cables on the Florida Reef Tract.
- Completed the first maps of 240km² of benthic habitat off northern Miami-Dade County in June 2009 with partners at the National Coral Reef Institute.
- Partnered with Miami-Dade County to install the first 20 mooring buoys off the coast of Miami in September 2009.

Challenges

- Sustaining funding for the Southeast Florida Coral Reef Water Quality Monitoring Program.
- Lack of fisheries independent monitoring on the northern Florida Reef Tract.
- Increasing reports of invasive lionfish (*Pterois* spp.)

Guam

Successes

- Natural Resources Subcommittee
- Natural Resource Strategy
- Mitigation Strategy, including support for mitigating impacts (eg. Mitigation in lieu fee program)
- Conservation Action Plan-watershed management plans
 - Piti/Asan Watershed
 - Santos Memorial Park
 - Masso Reservoir
 - Piti/Asan Community Stewardship Program
- Recreational LAS

- DAWR hosting series of community workshops to determine Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC)
- Used in Guam's MPAs to help regulate recreational activities
- **Challenges**
 - Building Capacity, limited funding, enforcement
 - Need for better engagement with stakeholders and diverse communities
 - New impacts – are Guam's reefs resilient to big global threats such as climate change

Hawaii

Success

Completion of *Hawaii's Coral Reef Strategy: Priorities for management in the main Hawaiian Islands, 2010-2020*.

- Provides a framework for management activities affecting coral reefs in the main Hawaiian Islands for the next decade
- Coordinates implementation of LAS projects on a site-based level
- Included the development of a multi-stakeholder process to prioritize focus sites
- Identified two sites as 3-5 year priority areas for program support

Challenges

Decreased local capacity for project development and implementation

- State budget deficit due to the economic downturn
- Layoffs and furloughs for many workers

Puerto Rico

Successes

- Completion of the Puerto Rico Coral Reef Management Plan
 - Provides a framework for management activities threatening coral reefs in Puerto Rico
 - Identified priority areas for management measure implementation, including LAS projects.

This is an example of the implantation of the LAS projects dealing with land based sources of pollution (Watershed Protection) in one of the Priority areas. Channel erosion in the Rio Loco due in part to old irrigation infrastructure, invasive species and the loss of Guánica Lagoon. The picture on the lower right shows the potential role of trees in this ecosystem to help to fortify streambanks and reduce erosion.

Challenges

- Decreased local capacity for project development and implementation
 - State budget deficit due to the economic downturn
 - Layoffs

Republic of the Marshall Islands

Successes

- Climate Proofing the community based conservation planning process through our Reimaanlok Plan
- Strengthened CMAC (Coastal Management Advisory Council)
- Hosted several Climate Change Workshops and Meetings
- Marine Science Certificate Program to increase capacity in outer islands

Challenges

- Logistics – transportation to outer islands
- Local Capacity
- Funding
- Coral Disease, Crown of Thorns and Bleaching
- Monitoring and Evaluation
- Enforcement

U.S. Virgin Islands

Successes

- Development of Phase II VI LAS building upon outputs from VI Management Priorities
- Marine Park Initiative (STXEEMP and STEER)
- Restoration activities within 3 priority watersheds to address land-based sources of pollution (ARRA funded)
- Increased collaboration and tools to respond to impacted reefs - partnership with NOAA Restoration Center & TNC's ARRA-funded coral nursery project
- Creation of interagency VI Lionfish Response Management Plan - collaborative action to address emerging threat of this invasive species

Challenges

- Insufficient technical and enforcement capacity
- Data gaps (e.g. fisheries, connectivity, health thresholds, etc.) – necessary to inform policy and management actions
- Climate change impacts

Roadway Stormwater Management Resolution

We are pleased that the USCRTF is considering adopting the Roadway Stormwater Management Resolution at this meeting. We endorse the resolution which the Governor introduced to the meeting this morning and wish to express our appreciation for his presentation.

We hope the Task Force will adopt this resolution requesting the Department of Transportation to provide a briefing on the findings and steps taken by the working group at the Fall 2010 USCRTF meeting.

Group Presentation led by the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE)

We are pleased that the Army Corps of Engineers have agreed to our request to give a group presentation on the relatively new coral mitigation regulations at this Task Force meeting on implementation of the Reauthorization of the Clean Water Act (CWA), as it applies to lost coral reef ecosystem functions.

Several agencies have key roles in the application of the Clean Water Act in support of coral reef resource protection. The ACE has the regulatory permitting authority, EPA has the statutory authority under the CWA, and both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service have mandated authority in the evaluation of the assessment of natural resource impacts and determining functional replacement of lost ecosystem function for proposed compensatory mitigation.

While we understand that the Corps is not able to develop the regulatory guidance in the time available, we request that they report back at the next meeting of the USCRTF in February 2010 in Washington D.C. We also encourage the ACE to develop a longer-term formal guidance document to address mitigation of coral reefs.

In conclusion, the Committee recommends the following actions by the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force:

- Support USDA's proposal for the NGO Partnership Funding initiative;
- Encourage more active engagement by ALL federal agencies in the implementation of each jurisdiction's coral reef management priorities and in the development of their own coral reef conservation implementation plans;
- Adopt the Roadway Resolution and request quick action from the USCRTF Secretariat until further conversations with DOT and update at the Winter meeting of the USCRTF in February 2010;
- Provide a briefing on the findings of the Working Group at the Fall 2010 USCRTF meeting;
- Encourage the Army Corps of Engineers to develop regulatory guidance to address lost coral reef ecosystem function and report back at the Winter meeting of the USCRTF in February 2010.

Sincerely

Evangelina Lujan, Chair