

### 403.93345 Coral reef protection.--

- (1) This section may be cited as the "Florida Coral Reef Protection Act."
- (2) This act applies to the sovereign submerged lands that contain coral reefs as defined in this act off the coasts of Broward, Martin, Miami-Dade, Monroe, and Palm Beach Counties.
- (3) As used in this section, the term:
  - (a) "Aggravating circumstances" means operating, anchoring, or mooring a vessel in a reckless or wanton manner; under the influence of drugs or alcohol; or otherwise with disregard for boating regulations concerning speed, navigation, or safe operation.
  - (b) "Coral" means species of the phylum Cnidaria found in state waters including:
    1. Class Anthozoa, including the subclass Octocorallia, commonly known as gorgonians, soft corals, and telestaceans; and
    2. Orders Scleractinia, commonly known as stony corals; Stolonifera, including, among others, the organisms commonly known as organ-pipe corals; Antipatharia, commonly known as black corals; and Hydrozoa, including the family Millaporidae and family Stylasteridae, commonly known as hydrocoral.
  - (c) "Coral reefs" mean:
    1. Limestone structures composed wholly or partially of living corals, their skeletal remains, or both, and hosting other coral, associated benthic invertebrates, and plants; or
    2. Hard-bottom communities, also known as live bottom habitat or colonized pavement, characterized by the presence of coral and associated reef organisms or worm reefs created by the *Phragmatopoma* species.
  - (d) "Damages" means moneys paid by any person or entity, whether voluntarily or as a result of administrative or judicial action, to the state as compensation, restitution, penalty, civil penalty, or mitigation for causing injury to or destruction of coral reefs.
  - (e) "Department" means the Department of Environmental Protection.
  - (f) "Fund" means the Ecosystem Management and Restoration Trust Fund.
  - (g) "Person" means any and all persons, natural or artificial, foreign or domestic, including any individual, firm, partnership, business, corporation, and company and the United States and all political subdivisions, regions, districts, municipalities, and public agencies thereof.

(h) "Responsible party" means the owner, operator, manager, or insurer of any vessel.

(4) The Legislature finds that coral reefs are valuable natural resources that contribute ecologically, aesthetically, and economically to the state. Therefore, the Legislature declares it is in the best interest of the state to clarify the department's powers and authority to protect coral reefs through timely and efficient recovery of monetary damages resulting from vessel groundings and anchoring-related injuries. It is the intent of the Legislature that the department be recognized as the state's lead trustee for coral reef resources located within waters of the state or on sovereignty submerged lands unless preempted by federal law. This section does not divest other state agencies and political subdivisions of the state of their interests in protecting coral reefs.

(5) The responsible party who knows or should know that their vessel has run aground, struck, or otherwise damaged coral reefs must notify the department of such an event within 24 hours after its occurrence. Unless otherwise prohibited or restricted by the United States Coast Guard, the responsible party must remove or cause the removal of the grounded or anchored vessel within 72 hours after the initial grounding or anchoring absent extenuating circumstances such as weather, or marine hazards that would prevent safe removal of the vessel. The responsible party must remove or cause the removal of the vessel or its anchor in a manner that avoids further damage to coral reefs and shall consult with the department in accomplishing this task. The responsible party must cooperate with the department to undertake damage assessment and primary restoration of the coral reef in a timely fashion.

(6) In any action or suit initiated pursuant to chapter 253 on the behalf of the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund, or under chapter 373 or this chapter for damage to coral reefs, the department may recover all damages from the responsible party, including, but not limited to:

(a) Compensation for the cost of replacing, restoring, or acquiring the equivalent of the coral reef injured and the value of the lost use and services of the coral reef pending its restoration, replacement, or acquisition of the equivalent coral reef, or the value of the coral reef if the coral reef cannot be restored or replaced or if the equivalent cannot be acquired.

(b) The cost of damage assessments, including staff time.

(c) The cost of activities undertaken by or at the request of the department to minimize or prevent further injury to coral or coral reefs pending restoration, replacement, or acquisition of an equivalent.

(d) The reasonable cost of monitoring the injured, restored, or replaced coral reef for at least 10 years. Such monitoring is not required for a single occurrence of damage to a coral reef damage totaling less than or equal to 1 square meter.

(e) The cost of enforcement actions undertaken in response to the destruction or loss of or injury to a coral reef, including court costs, attorney's fees, and expert witness fees.

(7) The department may use habitat equivalency analysis as the method by which the compensation described in subsection (5) is calculated. The parameters for calculation by this method may be prescribed by rule adopted by the department.

(8) In addition to the compensation described in subsection (5), the department may assess, per occurrence, civil penalties according <sup>1</sup>to the following schedule:

(a) For any anchoring of a vessel on a coral reef or for any other damage to a coral reef totaling less than or equal to an area of 1 square meter, \$150, provided that a responsible party who has anchored a recreational vessel as defined in s. [327.02](#) which is lawfully registered or exempt from registration pursuant to chapter 328 is issued, at least once, a warning letter in lieu of penalty; with aggravating circumstances, an additional \$150; occurring within a state park or aquatic preserve, an additional \$150.

(b) For damage totaling more than an area of 1 square meter but less than or equal to an area of 10 square meters, \$300 per square meter; with aggravating circumstances, an additional \$300 per square meter; occurring within a state park or aquatic preserve, an additional \$300 per square meter.

(c) For damage exceeding an area of 10 square meters, \$1,000 per square meter; with aggravating circumstances, an additional \$1,000 per square meter; occurring within a state park or aquatic preserve, an additional \$1,000 per square meter.

(d) For a second violation, the total penalty may be doubled.

(e) For a third violation, the total penalty may be tripled.

(f) For any violation after a third violation, the total penalty may be quadrupled.

(g) The total of penalties levied may not exceed \$250,000 per occurrence.

(9) To carry out the intent of this section, the department may enter into delegation agreements with another state agency or any coastal county with coral reefs within its jurisdiction. In deciding to execute such agreements, the department must consider the ability of the potential delegee to adequately and competently perform the duties required to fulfill the intent of this section. When such agreements are executed by the parties and incorporated in department rule, the delegee shall have all rights accorded the department by this section. Nothing herein shall be construed to require the department, another state agency, or a coastal county to enter into such an agreement.

(10) Nothing in this section shall be construed to prevent the department or other state agencies from entering into agreements with federal authorities related to the administration of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

(11) All damages recovered by or on behalf of this state for injury to, or destruction of, the coral reefs of the state that would otherwise be deposited in the general revenue accounts of the State Treasury or in the Internal Improvement Trust Fund shall be deposited in the Ecosystem Management and Restoration Trust Fund in the department and shall remain in such account until expended by the department for the purposes of this section. Moneys in the fund received from damages recovered for injury to, or destruction of, coral reefs must be expended only for the following purposes:

(a) To provide funds to the department for reasonable costs incurred in obtaining payment of the damages for injury to, or destruction of, coral reefs, including administrative costs and costs of experts and consultants. Such funds may be provided in advance of recovery of damages.

(b) To pay for restoration or rehabilitation of the injured or destroyed coral reefs or other natural resources by a state agency or through a contract to any qualified person.

(c) To pay for alternative projects selected by the department. Any such project shall be selected on the basis of its anticipated benefits to the residents of this state who used the injured or destroyed coral reefs or other natural resources or will benefit from the alternative project.

(d) All claims for trust fund reimbursements under paragraph (a) must be made within 90 days after payment of damages is made to the state.

(e) Each private recipient of fund disbursements shall be required to agree in advance that its accounts and records of expenditures of such moneys are subject to audit at any time by appropriate state officials and to submit a final written report describing such expenditures within 90 days after the funds have been expended.

(f) When payments are made to a state agency from the fund for expenses compensable under this subsection, such expenditures shall be considered as being for extraordinary expenses, and no agency appropriation shall be reduced by any amount as a result of such reimbursement.

(12) The department may adopt rules pursuant to ss. [120.536](#) and [120.54](#) to administer this section.

**History.**--s. 57, ch. 2009-86.

<sup>1</sup>**Note.**--The word "to" was inserted by the editors.