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DEP WORKING TO PROTECT LESSER-KNOWN FLORIDA REEFS

~ Increased outreach, development of coastal construction guidelines and continued monitoring among 2008 accomplishments~

MIAMI –The Florida Department of Environmental Protection’s (DEP) Coral Reef Conservation Program (CRCP) continues to implement programs and increase public awareness to protect the more than 239,000 acres of coral reefs that lie north of the Florida Keys. The CRCP’s recently developed Best Management Practices (BMPs) for coastal construction, combined with the sixth consecutive year of biological monitoring and increased public awareness are increasing protection of these reefs, which play a crucial role both in Florida’s environment and economy.

“Natural resources are at the core of Florida’s prosperity and quality of life and coral reefs are one of the state’s most valuable resources,” said Lee Edmiston, Office of Coastal and Aquatic Managed Areas (CAMA) Director. “I applaud the ambitious efforts and successes of the Coral Reef Conservation Program and look forward to projects planned in 2009.”

The 239,000 acres of coral reefs and associated reef resources lie within a four-county area that stretches more than 100 miles from the northern boundary of Biscayne National Park in Miami-Dade County to the St. Lucie Inlet in Martin County. These reefs are part of the third longest reef system in the world which annually sustains more than 71,000 jobs and generates \$6.3 billion dollars in sales and income for Florida.

As part of their conservation and protection efforts, the CRCP manages the Southeast Florida Coral Reef Initiative (SEFCRI), working with partners and stakeholders to direct the implementation of 140 projects that were developed as part of Florida’s Local Action Strategy for the protection of regional coral reefs, and are linked to the goals and objectives of the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force’s National Action Plan.

The SEFCRI local action strategies target maritime industry and coastal construction impacts, land-based sources of pollution, fishing, diving and other uses, awareness and appreciation and reef injury prevention and response.

Some of the projects completed by the CRCP in 2008 include:

- The development of BMPs to guide the construction, management and monitoring of coastal construction projects that will directly or indirectly impact coral reefs. The BMPs are intended to serve as a guide for coastal construction engineers and

firms, environmental managers, planners, regulators and resource users in the coastal construction industry.

- The completion of the sixth year of annual biological monitoring of coral reefs throughout the region, which is used to track coral status, develop trends and monitor the overall health of the reef ecosystem. In addition, funding for the monitoring has been secured for three more years along with the establishment of additional monitoring sites.
- The completion of a coral reef teacher training workshop by fifty area teachers, selected from more than ninety applicants. Evaluations from the program indicate that the resources and material covered in the class will reach 14,000 plus students in the 2008-2009 school year alone.
- The distribution of public service announcements to local television and radio stations, as well as 55 hotels and seven movie theaters within the four-county region to educate residents and visitors about the regions extensive and vulnerable coral reefs.

“2008 was a very productive year. With the support of our partners, the CRCP has completed many of the short-term action strategies that comprise the SEFCRI,” said Chantal Collier, CRCP Manager. “Together we have accomplished a great deal, but we still have a lot of work to do and we look forward to another successful year of improving the protection of Florida’s coral reefs.”

Scientists from all over the world attribute the degradation of coral reefs to a combination of global stressors including climate change and ocean acidification, coupled with regional and local stressors such as declining water quality associated with land-based sources of pollution, overfishing, and the destruction of habitats associated with coastal development.

To help combat this degradation, the CRCP and SEFCRI are continuing their protective activities. A variety of short-term projects are slated for completion in 2009, including:

- The installation of coral reef signage to educate boaters at marinas and boat ramps within Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach and Martin counties.
- The creation of maps identifying benthic (the collection of organisms living on or in sea bottom) habitats in Miami-Dade County.
- Developing alternatives to minimize or eliminate hard bottom and reef impacts from anchoring activities in designated anchorages at the Port of Miami and the Port of Palm Beach.

The Florida Department Coral Reef Conservation Program, the newest program of CAMA Office of Coastal and Aquatic Managed Areas, was established in 2004. CAMA also manages three National Estuarine Research Reserves in the state, 41 aquatic preserves and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. CAMA’s programs and activities are designed to help Floridians better understand and conserve the state’s resources through research, education and preservation.

For more information on DEP's Coral Reef Conservation Program and the SEFCRI, visit <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/programs/coral/>.

For more information on DEP's Office of Coastal and Aquatic Managed Areas, visit <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal>.