



SUMMARY REPORT: *Acropora* Conservation Workshops

INTRODUCTION

In response to a 2004 petition filed by the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) to list elkhorn (*Acropora palmata*), staghorn (*A. cervicornis*), and fused-staghorn (*A. prolifera*) corals as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) listed elkhorn and staghorn corals as threatened species on May 9, 2006. As threatened species, the prohibitions prescribed by Section 9 of the ESA do not automatically apply upon listing as they would for species listed as endangered. Therefore, NMFS must determine which of the section 9 ESA prohibitions are necessary and advisable to provide for the conservation of the species. Such regulations are promulgated under section 4(d) of the ESA and are known as 4(d) rules. Additionally, NMFS has not more than one year from the published date of the final listing rule to designate critical habitat for both species.

To assist in the development of a 4(d) rule and the designation of critical habitat for the two threatened coral species, NMFS sponsored seven public scoping workshops throughout South Florida and the Caribbean. The initial announcement for the public workshops targeted individuals involved in the public comment process for the proposed listing rule, including Federal, State, and Territorial agency personnel, non-governmental organizations, and academic and research institutions. The announcement was also posted on relevant email "list serves" and information boards. Additional notice for the workshop was given in conjunction with the press release announcing the final rule to list both corals as threatened under the ESA. The press release was distributed not only to pertinent sectors of the media and NOAA public relations personnel, but also to all contacts that received the original workshop announcement. The workshop announcement, press release, and final rule are all available on the NMFS Southeast Regional Office of Protected Resources Division webpage at <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/protres.htm>.

PROCESS

NMFS sponsored seven *Acropora* Conservation Workshops in the following locations:

- Dania Beach, Florida
- Key Largo, Florida
- Marathon, Florida
- Key West, Florida
- Kingshill, St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands
- Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands

- San Juan, Puerto Rico

NMFS Southeast Regional Office (SERO) staff coordinated with NOAA staff and other partner agencies within each locality to determine the best times, dates, and venues for each workshop. The specific venues are given in the workshop announcement. Ultimately, the workshops were scheduled for the evening hours at venues known locally as popular sites for public meetings. NOAA staff and partner agencies local to each workshop site also assisted in determining who to contact to publicize the workshops and to encourage full attendance by stakeholders. For potential workshop participants unable to attend one of the workshops, provisions were made for the submission of comments, relevant to the development of a proposed 4(d) rule and designation of critical habitat, via mail, fax, or email until June 2, 2006. Additionally, informational handouts and other relevant materials were made available online prior to the workshops (see <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/protres.htm>). Hard copies of the presentation, informational handouts, and other relevant materials were distributed to workshop participants at each location.

The workshops were structured into a format conducive to focused and productive discussions, as these were intended to be constructive brainstorming and information collecting sessions. Thus, following a brief overview presentation by NMFS SERO staff that covered the progression of events leading up to the workshops and the implications of a threatened listing, the workshop participants broke out into three working groups. The working groups were organized into the following categories:

- Fishing, Diving, and Recreational Activities
- Coastal and Nearshore Construction and Related Activities
- Research and Recovery

Examples of possible discussion topics within each grouping were provided to help participants organize themselves into one of the three groups. The groupings allowed for focused discussion, which was guided by several focus questions (see presentation for specific questions). These questions resulted in the following:

- A list of activities and programs that have a direct or indirect impact on elkhorn and staghorn corals
- A list and evaluation of specific impacts of the activities or programs identified
- A list of possible modifications for activities and programs deemed to have an adverse effect on these corals
- A list of physical and biological features to be considered in the designation of critical habitat
- A list of geographic areas to be considered in the designation of critical habitat

Before the end of the workshop, the breakout groups were brought back together and the group leaders (i.e., one of three NMFS SERO staff) summarized the discussion that occurred within their group. All of the workshop participants were then asked to provide additional comments and to ask questions relevant to each group category heading. The workshop concluded with a discussion of the coming steps following the conclusion of all seven of the workshops. NMFS SERO staff informed workshop participants that the information gathered at these workshops would be taken back to SERO, summarized, analyzed, and then considered in the development of a proposed 4(d) rule and designation of critical habitat. Once a proposed 4(d) and/or critical habitat rule is developed, NMFS SERO anticipates holding a series of public comment hearings in the same locations as the workshops.

WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

The workshops averaged 28 people in attendance per location. St. Thomas, USVI had the greatest number of participants (48) and Marathon, FL had the least (18). Participants represented the following stakeholder groups:

- non-governmental organizations
- research and academic institutions
- state, federal, and territorial agencies
- commercial fishing interests
- charter dive, snorkel, and fishing operations
- aquaculture and aquarium collection entities
- county and municipal agencies

Listed below are the themes that resulted from 4(d) rule discussions within each breakout group category:

BREAKOUT GROUP CATEGORY	THEMES
Fishing, Diving, and Recreational Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fishing gear types and uses • Increased outreach & education • Better enforcement of current regulations • Establishment of a Florida Boater Licensing Program • Coordinating with existing Local Action Strategies (LAS) and grassroots organizations
Coastal & Nearshore Construction and Related Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enforcement of and compliance with current regulations • Appropriate consequences for violations

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased funding (i.e., adequate agency staffing) • Better coordination among federal and state/territorial agencies at the regional and local levels
Research & Recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work within the existing research permitting structure and process (do not make it more difficult to acquire a research permit) • Create a central database or data clearinghouse for notification of research activities and for data sharing • Coordinate and avoid duplication of efforts • Exemption of live rock aquaculture

Discussions of the physical and biological features necessary for the conservation of the species and for designation of critical habitat resulted in the following list of most commonly mentioned factors:

- Hard substrate (algae free)
- Water quality (transparency, low nutrient content, low turbidity)
- Depth range
- High wave energy/flushing/currents
- Water temperature
- Population density
- Genetic diversity

Areas desired by participants as potential sites of critical habitat ranged from including the entire Florida reef tract and all existing stands in Puerto Rico and USVI to discrete areas within each region. Additionally, participants suggested designating areas known historically for supporting stands of elkhorn and staghorn corals, areas outside U.S. jurisdiction, and areas currently unoccupied by these corals. Discrete areas suggested for designation included the following locations:

REGION	LOCATIONS
Florida	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing stands in Palm Beach and Broward Counties, which are the northern extent of their range

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Careysfort • Dry Tortugas • Port Everglades to Hillsboro Inlet • Horseshoe Reef • Pennecamp • Key West Channel • Lower Matacumbe • Gulf Stream Reef
Puerto Rico	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All MPAs • Punta Boqueron • Culebra • Mona Channel Reserves • “Shacks” Beach • Tres Palmas Marine Reserve
USVI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fredriksted Reef System

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, participants remained highly engaged throughout the workshop process and provided a high level of constructive feedback. Relative to the formulation of a 4(d) rule, the overriding sentiment among participants seemed to be that strengthening, coordinating, properly funding, and adequately enforcing the existing regulatory programs and protective initiatives is preferred over an additional layer of new regulations. Many suggested that greater compliance with existing regulations could be achieved through education and outreach efforts, which would create knowledgeable and aware members of various user groups and the general public.

Some participants suggested that the 4(d) rule exempt only those activities that meet a set of minimum operating standards. One example is exempting research permits issued by Federal or State/Territorial Agencies that already employ a rigorous set of standards for the approval of permit applications. Another example is exempting regulatory programs, which have jurisdiction over such activities as sewage treatment or coastal development, only if they meet and enforce a strict set of best management practices (BMPs). Failure to enforce such BMPs should, at the suggestion of workshop participants, result in appropriate fines, limitations on federal funding, or revocation of licenses.