

*9th Coral Reef Task Force Meeting
February 26-27, 2003
Washington, D.C.*

Resolution 9-1: Caribbean Water Quality

Proposed For Adoption By U.S. Coral Reef Task Force
02/27/03

Whereas, in the Caribbean waters of Florida, Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands, the coral reef resources are a cornerstone of the economy and support the fisheries of the Gulf of Mexico, Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean; and

Whereas, these coral reefs are extensive and of local, national and international importance, affording domestic and international divers, anglers, boaters, and sightseers the opportunity to develop an understanding of the aesthetic, recreational, economic, and scientific value of these resources to the world economy; and

Whereas, there are many different species of corals found in U.S. waters, which grow in a wide variety of marine habitats. Coral growth is best measured in geologic time, some coral species growing no faster than one centimeter per year; and

Whereas, the coral reefs of the Caribbean exist in close proximity to coastal development that provides lodging and infrastructure to residents and visitors; and

Whereas, these coral reef ecosystems often serve as the receiving waters for land-based pollution such as sewage, industrial effluent, and sedimentation from erosion; and

Whereas, in the U.S. Virgin Islands, the current wastewater treatment system is in dire need of repair, replacement and expansion, to accommodate increasing populations and to avoid the repeated incidents of sewage spills into the ocean. Such spills adversely affect coral reef health and the public health of residents and visitors alike; and

Whereas the Government of the U.S. Virgin Islands is under consent orders from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. District Court, dealing directly with issues and violations regarding the Territory's failing solid waste and wastewater treatment systems; and

Whereas, in Florida, within the fossilized coral reefs that make up much of the land area of the Florida Keys in Monroe County, there are at least 6,500 cesspits, 25,000 septic tanks, 900 shallow injection wells and other unknown systems being used for wastewater management. Daily tidal flushing through the porous limestone conveys inadequately treated, nutrient-rich wastewater entry into the nearshore coral reef system, the vitality of which is based on maintaining nutrient-poor waters; and

Whereas, in Florida, the coral reef ecosystem of the Keys receives water from the South Florida watershed, and implementation of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) is needed to improve the quality, quantity and timing of water flow to these areas.

Whereas, in Puerto Rico, more than 30% of the population is not connected to a wastewater treatment system and a study to prioritize wastewater hookups and develop an implementation plan is desperately needed; and

Whereas, the coral reefs of the U.S. Virgin Islands are exposed to the effects of erosion and sedimentation from more than 35 miles of unpaved Federally owned roads and more than 10 miles of locally owned roads which drain into Caribbean waters;

Whereas, these and other land based sources of pollution can result in negative impacts to coral reef habitat, varying from complete destruction to disease; and

Whereas, the tropical reef ecosystems of the Atlantic-Caribbean waters are connected by the currents and the movement and migration of organisms, and taking action at the local level is essential for the recovery of coral reefs within the entire region; and

Now, Therefore, Be It Resolved,

That the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force, supports, in coordination with local jurisdictions:

- (a) Assistance to bring the U.S. Virgin Islands facilities into compliance with the aforementioned consent orders;
- (b) Application of resources to address wastewater treatment in the Florida Keys;
- (c) Implementation of the CERP to benefit the coral reef ecosystem of the Florida Keys;
- (d) Development of an implementation plan for wastewater management hookup prioritization in Puerto Rico and implementation of that plan;
- (e) The stabilization of Federally owned as well as locally owned unpaved roads in the U.S. Virgin Islands to eliminate erosion and sedimentation problems; and
- (f) Assistance in the identification of appropriate grant opportunities for local governments in addressing land based sources of pollution,

recognizing that, in the case of the Federal members of the Task Force, support for specific amounts and individual actions will be subject to the budget and appropriations process.