

Frequently Asked Questions

U.S. Coral Reef Task Force: Handbook on Coral Reef Impacts: Avoidance, Minimization, Compensatory Mitigation and Restoration

1. What does the Handbook cover?

This Handbook provides a summary of current avoidance, minimization and compensatory mitigation and restoration strategies that may help address physical damage resulting from direct adverse impacts to coral reefs (e.g., dredging, placement of fill, vessel groundings, or accidental discharges like oil spills) and indirect adverse impacts to coral reefs (e.g., beach nourishment, sedimentation from poor land use practices, sedimentation from dredging or vessel movement, or storm water contaminants). In addition to the summary of applicable policies and description of various roles and responsibilities, the Handbook includes an evaluation framework for both planned impacts to coral reefs and responding to unplanned impacts to coral reefs, recommendations for data collection for coral reef conditional assessment surveys, a summary of existing mitigation options for unavoidable impacts and key considerations for each option, and considerations for performance standards and monitoring of coral reef mitigation and restoration activities.

2. Why was the Handbook developed?

Coral reefs are subject to numerous local, regional and global stressors. Managers and regulators working to address impacts to coral reefs are further constrained by the difficulty in restoring and replacing these complex systems. While existing guidance and tools have been developed for mitigation and restoration for stream and wetland impacts, it is challenging to translate these guidance and tools to coral reef systems because they are significantly different from streams and wetlands in terms of structure, function, and ecosystem dynamics. There is also considerable uncertainty in being able to replace lost coral ecosystem functions. When working in the marine environment, other factors such as site ownership, site protection and long-term maintenance present challenging hurdles and are presently managed on a case by case basis. This Handbook is providing lessons learned to project proponents and regulators by consolidating the existing state of knowledge.

3. Who is likely to use the Handbook?

The target audience for this Handbook includes project applicants, proponents, permittees or consultants for projects that may affect coral reefs or for responsible parties (RP) and their consultants in the event of unplanned impact events. This Handbook is also intended to be a reference for resource managers who are charged with project permitting, damage response, impact mitigation, and habitat restoration.

4. How will this Handbook help stakeholders?

The Handbook provides another tool in the toolbox to help stakeholders understand key considerations when working in or around coral reef habitats. With the current worldwide decline of coral reef ecosystems, it is imperative that activities in the U.S. consistently and effectively avoid impacts to coral reef habitats. When impacts cannot be avoided, measures should be taken to minimize adverse impacts. Unavoidable impacts may warrant compensatory mitigation through appropriate actions to replace losses of functions and services. Consistent and targeted efforts should be made to address as many coral reef stressors that can be controlled by management and regulatory actions. This Handbook provides useful information to help project proponents avoid and minimize adverse impacts to coral reefs and if there is unavoidable impacts it provides useful information to project proponents and regulators on key considerations in evaluating impacts and developing compensatory mitigation actions.

5. Do I have to follow the handbook for any work impacting coral reefs?

No. This Handbook is not official agency guidance, nor does it represent a comprehensive policy statement and nothing herein replaces requirements contained within statute, codified in regulation or agency guidance documents. It is developed as a tool to assist project proponents, regulators, and resource trustee agencies in understanding the current state of knowledge in avoiding, minimizing, and compensating for coral reef impacts.

6. If I propose a mitigation option not in the handbook, is it automatically denied?

No. This Handbook does not authorize/deny any mitigation actions. Project proponents or responsible parties are strongly urged to work closely with the appropriate permitting authorities, resource trustees, and other key federal, state or territorial agencies early and often in developing the appropriate mitigation strategy. The USCRTF believes that due to the complex nature of coral reef ecosystems, and the even more complex nature of identifying and providing appropriate compensatory mitigation or restoration actions for lost ecosystem functions and services, the emphasis on maximizing avoidance and minimization of impacts cannot be overstated.

7. For planned impacts, how do I design my project to not have to do any compensatory mitigation?

The USCRTF believes that projects should be designed and implemented, to the maximum extent practicable, to avoid impacts to coral reefs. If it is not possible to avoid impacts to coral reefs, then those impacts should be minimized as much as possible. The Handbook provides some best management practices for some activities to avoid and minimize impacts to corals. Project proponents or responsible parties are strongly urged to work closely with the appropriate permitting authorities, resource trustees, and other key federal, state or territorial agencies early and often

to identify the most appropriate avoidance and minimization actions for the specific project under consideration. After the appropriate avoidance and minimization actions have been incorporated into the proposed project, the agencies will determine whether compensatory mitigation is required for the remaining unavoidable impacts to corals.

8. For unplanned impacts, how can I get coral reef issues resolved as quickly as possible?

There are many legal authorities that govern the response to unplanned coral reef impacts, depending on the nature and location of the incident, and there are multiple legal pathways that could be triggered at the federal, state or territorial level. These make responding to unplanned impacts complex. In the aftermath of an unplanned impact the first priority is eliminating the source of the injury, such as a removing a grounded vessel or cleaning up an oil spill, and the protection of life and property. The Handbook describes the general assessment and restoration methods that can be used regardless of the source of injury to help provide an understanding of the process and procedures in dealing with unplanned impacts. The specific federal, state, territorial, or local agencies need to be engaged early in the response to determine the specific regulations that cover any response and restoration activities. Early coordination and a clear understanding of the process will help improve the ability for the responsible parties and resource trustees to reach a resolution sooner, though it may still be a complex and long process.

9. The Handbook identifies a lot of uncertainty with coral reef mitigation, how do I deal with that with my project?

Coral reefs are complex systems subject to numerous activity, regional and global stressors. Natural reefs are biologically, chemically, physically and morphologically complex, are difficult to replicate, and take time to develop their ecological structure and function. Many coral species are particularly slow growing (tenth of an inch per year) and long-lived (decades to centuries) resulting in a long response and replacement time. These factors contribute to the uncertainty with developing and implementing compensatory mitigation and restoration. Project proponents or responsible parties should avoid and minimize impacts to the full extent practicable. For those unavoidable impacts, it is strongly recommended that project proponents and responsible parties work closely with the permitting authorities, resource trustees and other key federal, state or territorial agencies to address uncertainties. The handbook provides a list of questions that are recommended for discussion on individual projects to help determine a strategy to deal with project specific uncertainties.

10. Who makes the final decision on when my coral reef mitigation is enough?

The final decision on the appropriateness of the coral reef mitigation lies with the applicable permitting authorities. Project proponents or responsible parties are strongly urged to work closely with the appropriate permitting authorities, resource

trustees, and other key federal, state or territorial agencies early and often in developing the appropriate mitigation strategy. The Handbook provides some tools and considerations to assist in the development of the mitigation strategy and discussions with the appropriate federal, state and territorial agencies. However, this Handbook is not official agency guidance, nor does it represent a comprehensive policy statement and nothing herein replaces requirements contained within statute, codified in regulation or agency guidance documents.