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Coral Species Put on 'Threatened' List

By ADRIAN SAINZ
The Associated Press

MIAMI -- Two coral species in Florida and the Caribbean now have a spot on the federal threatened list because of dangers posed by human activity, hurricanes and higher water temperatures.

The elkhorn and staghorn coral species have suffered a 97 percent decline in areas off the Florida Keys and in the Caribbean since 1985 and must be protected, National Marine Fisheries Service biologist Stephania Bolden said Friday.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which oversees the fisheries service, made the announcement Thursday in Washington, making the species the first coral to earn a threatened distinction. The move was praised by scientists and environmentalists.

The federal government will hold forums in Florida and the Caribbean to discuss suggestions for rules to protect the coral under the Endangered Species Act, Bolden said.

A species is considered threatened if it's likely to become an endangered

species. The rules involving threatened species are not as strict as those involving endangered species, which face extinction.

Both coral species have protruding branches that look like antlers. They are part of reefs that are home to fish, crustaceans and other invertebrates. Reefs also serve as barriers from storm waves.

Several factors have harmed the coral in the past 20 years. Disease, temperature-induced bleaching, hurricanes, more nutrients in the water, damage from anchors or boat groundings and increased sediments and contaminants from land-based sources have hurt the coral species.

Off the U.S. Virgin Islands, as much as 40 percent of coral died in some reefs last year, and the coral that survived probably isn't healthy enough to survive another hot summer, U.S. Geological Survey biologist Caroline Rogers told The Associated Press last month. Some 100-year-old colonies are reported to have died.

Coral bleaching is attributed to higher-than-normal water temperatures and causes the coral to lose color and its food source. Hurricanes have always been present, though Bolden

points out that the most recent die-off also corresponds with a cycle of increased storm activity.

Tyler Smith, a coral researcher at the University of the Virgin Islands, welcomed the ruling because it will "give a respect for the species." Smith and other scientists were mapping reefs around the islands and Puerto Rico to assess the extent of the massive coral die-off last year.

The California-based Center for Biological Diversity had filed a petition to raise the coral from a "species of special concern."

"If these losses are not arrested and reversed, Florida's corals could go extinct within the foreseeable future, resulting not only in the loss of these irreplaceable forms of life, but also billions of dollars in tourist, recreational, medicinal, and subsistence income," the group said in praising the government's decision.

Associated Press Writer Mat Probasco in the U.S. Virgin Islands contributed to t