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Two rapidly vanishing corals to receive federal protection

Two disappearing corals, once so common they formed thick forests on Florida Keys reefs, are the first corals named to the federal protection list.

BY CURTIS MORGAN

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Two rare corals found off South Florida and throughout the Caribbean have been designated for federal protection -- the first ones named to the list of threatened and endangered species.

The National Marine Fisheries Service announced Thursday that elkhorn and staghorn corals, which have large and spectacular branches that resemble antlers, had declined sharply enough to qualify as species threatened with extinction.

Off the Florida Keys, scientists estimate that as much as 90 percent of both species, which once formed dense forests and served as major reef builders, have died since the 1970s. Losses are even higher in the Caribbean.

"The decline was phenomenal," said Brian Keller, science coordinator for the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, which includes all the waters off the Keys.

Pollution, algae, sediment and a

host of diseases, from black-band and white-band disease to white plague, have been blamed along with hurricanes and rising sea temperatures, which has been linked to coral bleaching.

Brent Plater, a staff attorney with California-based Center for Biological Diversity, which two years ago filed a petition to have the corals elevated from "species of special concern," said the new designation should increase research on coral declines and could result in new regulations.

Coral is already protected in the 3,843-square-mile Keys sanctuary, which stretches from Biscayne National Park to the Dry Tortugas, but measures could be expanded to other areas or added. Staghorn and elkhorn also are found off Miami-Dade and Broward counties, as well as off Texas.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which oversees the fisheries service, made the announcement at a coral reef task force meeting in Washington.

The next step will be a series of public workshops, starting Mon-

day in Dania Beach and continuing through the week in the Keys, to help experts develop a recovery plan, said Jennifer Moore, a natural resources specialist with the fisheries service in St. Petersburg.

In addition to potential new regulations, she said, the plan could include restoration efforts, such as nurseries to grow corals for replanting on reefs.

Plater said increasing number of hurricanes, rising water temperatures and spreading diseases all had one thing in common that needed to be addressed:

"The engine driving all of those things is global warming," he said.

"Not only are we going to be looking at local impacts from beach restoration, [but] we need to think and act globally."

But Moore stressed that "NOAA has not said that global warming is the cause." The agency has pointed to increased hurricanes and rising sea temperatures, but she said, "We have not identified all the mechanisms."