

## NOAA seeks to add over 60 coral species to endangered list due to climate change

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By Johnny Kelly - Environmental Policy Examiner



The Purple Coral species is only found in the waters off the U.S. West Coast from California to Baja California. Credits: (seasky.org)

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Service is seeking to add more than 60 coral species to the endangered list, citing climate change.

In the wide-sweeping proposal announced Friday, the Fisheries Service said 59 species in the Pacific and seven in the Caribbean would be listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The Fisheries Service is also proposing that two Caribbean species, the elkhorn and staghorn corals, already listed under the ESA, be reclassified from threatened to endangered.

"Climate change and other activities are putting these corals at risk," said Jane Lubchenco, head of NOAA.

"This is an important, sensible next step toward preserving the benefits provided by these species," Lubchenco added.

Lubchenco says corals provide habitat that support fisheries, generate jobs through recreation and tourism, and protect coastlines.

The proposal is in response to a 2009 petition from the Center for Biological Diversity seeking to have 83 species listed.

NOAA considered listing 82 of the species, and ultimately decided 66 met the criteria. Friday's action is the result of a court-approved settlement between the agency and the environmental group.

Last April, NOAA scientists reported that more than half of those 82 species were "more likely than not" to face extinction by 2100.

"It's a bittersweet victory to declare these animals endangered. I'm deeply saddened that our extraordinary coral reefs are on the brink of extinction, but there's hope that protection under the Endangered Species Act will give them a powerful safety net for survival," said Miyoko Sakashita, the ocean director at the Center for Biological Diversity.

Climate change is the most important threat to these key ocean species, with more than 97 percent of reefs predicted to experience severe thermal stress, which can cause massive bleaching and mortality, according to the proposal.

Corals are very sensitive to disease and temperature change, and the fact that seas have warmed and become more acidic as carbon dioxide emissions have risen, led to NOAA's proposal and focus on climate change.

The acidity weakens the skeletal structure of coral.

The polar bear is the only other species listed under the Endangered Species Act because of climate change, and that's because of shrinking sea ice.

NOAA had never before analyzed so many species over such a wide geographic range. The closest in scope was a review of 30 West Coast salmon and steelhead species in 1994.