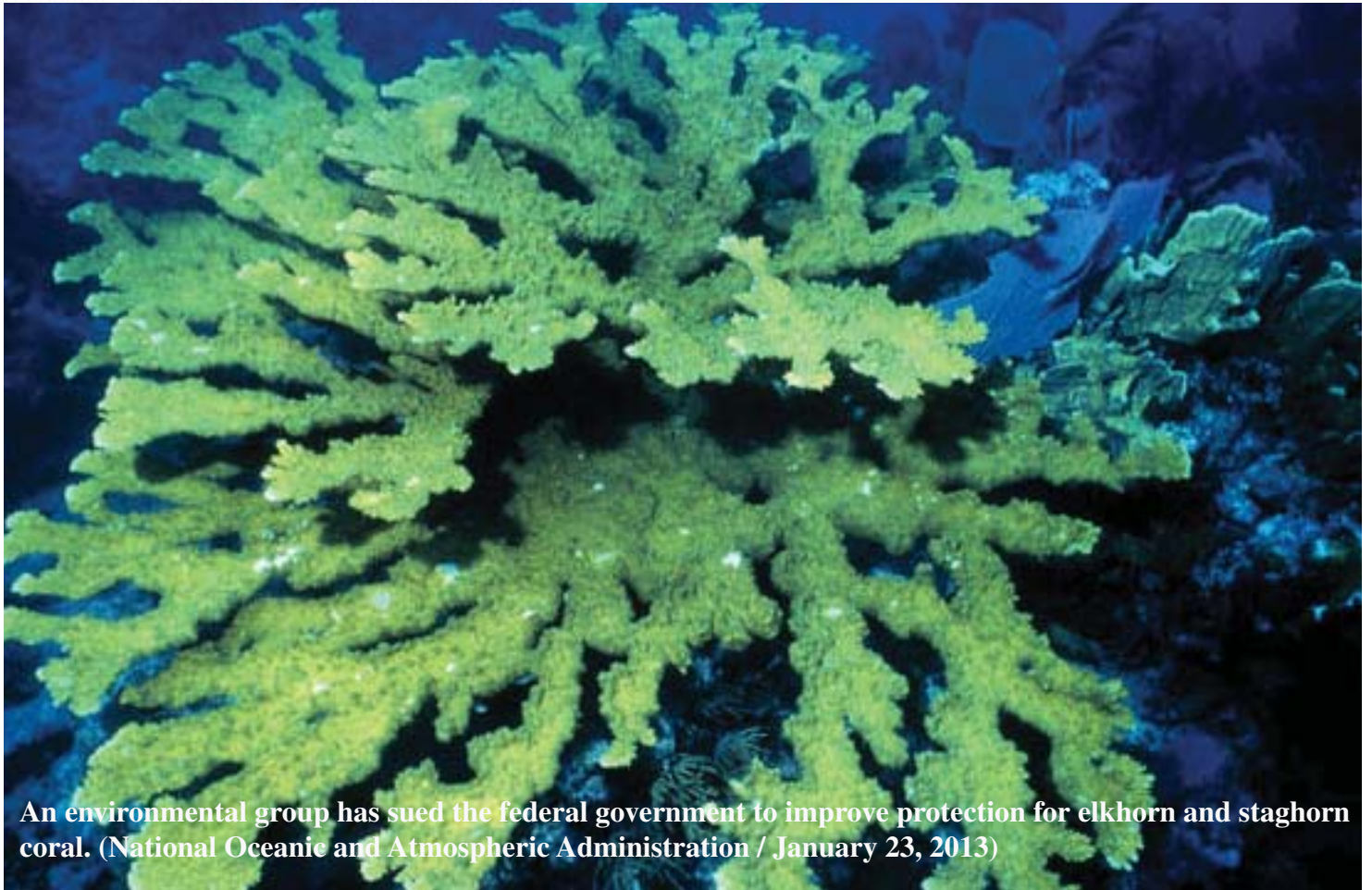


Group sues to protect South Florida corals

Two species suffered severe declines in 30 years



An environmental group has sued the federal government to improve protection for elkhorn and staghorn coral. (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration / January 23, 2013)

By David Fleshler, Sun Sentinel
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An environmental group filed suit Wednesday to force the federal government to improve protection for two species of coral found off the southeast Florida coast.

The Center for Biological Diversity, based in Tucson, Ariz., sued the National Marine Fisheries Service for failing to prepare recovery plans for elkhorn and staghorn corals, both of which are on the endangered species list.

Once among the most important reef-building corals, elkhorn and staghorn corals have sustained a decline of up to 98 percent in their habitat, which stretches from the reefs off Palm Beach County to the Caribbean Sea.

Among the major threats to these species are pollution, ocean warming and ocean acidification from the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide caused by the burning of fossil fuels.

“Elkhorn and staghorn corals used to be all over Florida’s reefs, and now they’re in danger of go-

ing extinct,” said Jaclyn Lopez, a lawyer in the center’s St. Petersburg office. “They desperately need a recovery plan and quick action to reduce carbon dioxide pollution.”

Allison Garrett, spokeswoman for the National Marine Fisheries Service, said the agency does not comment on active litigation.

The National Marine Fisheries Service put the two species on the endangered species list in 2006, the first corals to be so designated. But the service has failed to follow through and draft recovery plans, a legally required step for endangered species, according to the lawsuit filed in the U.S. District Court in Tampa.

“The agency’s inaction is hurting the prospects of recovery for these imperiled species, as recovery plans for the corals would outline actions needed to conserve and recover the species,” states the 11-page suit. The group wants a judge to order the agency to prepare recovery plans.

The corals’ decline has been relatively recent, occurring over the past 30 years or so, the group says. “Dense thickets of elkhorn and staghorn corals used to dominate Caribbean coral reefs in the 1970s,” the lawsuit states.

“Now, colonies are small, isolated and patchy. Because the populations are fragmented, the corals are unable to recruit new colonies because corals need to be in close proximity for reproduction.”

Lopez said time is getting short to save the corals.

“If we want a future with beautiful coral reefs, healthy fisheries and thriving marine life, we have to act now,” she said.