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Feds propose listing 66 coral species in Pacific, Caribbean as endangered or threatened

By Associated Press

HONOLULU — The National Marine Fisheries Service on Friday proposed listing 66 coral species in the Pacific and Caribbean oceans as endangered or threatened.

Corals provide habitat that support fisheries, generate jobs through recreation and tourism, and protect coastlines from erosion, said National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Administrator Jane Lubchenco.

Yet, scientific research indicates climate change and human activities are putting corals at risk, she said.

“This is an important, sensible next step toward preserving the benefits provided by these species, both now and into the future,” Lubchenco said in a statement.

The agency wants to list 59 species in the Pacific — seven as endangered, 52 as threatened. In the Caribbean, it says five should be listed as endangered and two as threatened.

Listing species would not prohibit people from fishing or diving near coral, but they may outlaw harming, wounding, killing or collecting the species. Such rules wouldn’t be automatic, but could be established.

The fisheries service will be seeking public feedback on the proposal over the next 90 days. It will accept comment online and at meetings in 20 locations in Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa, Florida and other areas.

The agency said it was acting 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.

“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.

To save corals, she says rapid cuts in greenhouse gas pollution will need to be made to stop global warming and the acidification of the oceans.

Greenhouse gases add carbon to the ocean, boosting its acidity. This makes it harder for coral to grow and weakens coral skeletons.