

West Hawaii Today

NOAA given deadline for corals' endangered species status

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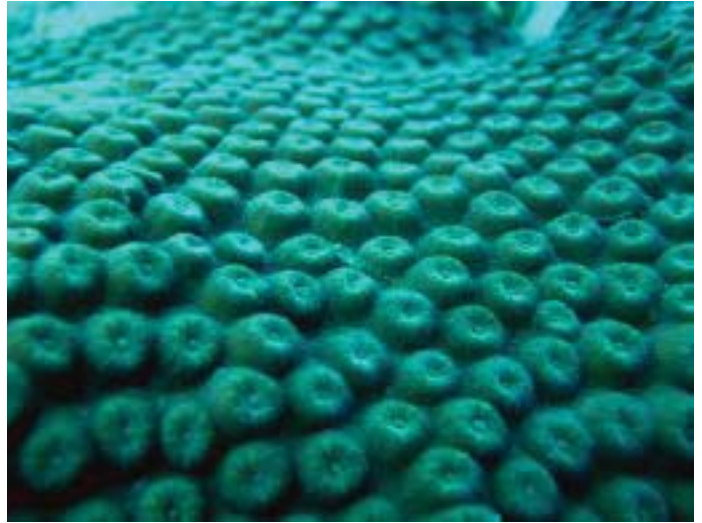
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WEST HAWAII TODAY

Corals, occurring in waters ranging from Hawaii and Florida to American territories in the Caribbean and Pacific, have all declined by more than 30 percent over a 30-year period. They face extinction because of overfishing, pollution and the overarching threats of global warming and ocean acidification, said Miyoko Sakashita, oceans director for the Center for Biological Diversity.

"Unless we protect them right now, coral reefs will be lost within decades, and our grandchildren will never see these colorful underwater forests teeming with life," she said.

A settlement reached Tuesday requires the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Service to decide in about seven months whether 82 coral species will be listed as endangered or threatened. That decision has been already overdue, Sakashita said.

The center petitioned in 2009 to protect 83 corals, including nine in Hawaii waters, via the Endangered Species Act, administered by the Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Fisheries Service found the listing might be warranted for all except one



species -- the ivory tree coral, or *Oculina varicosa*, found in water from Florida to North Carolina and off Bermuda and the West Indies. However, the agency failed to meet its legally mandated deadline to determine whether the listing is warranted and propose rules to protect the corals.

Fisheries Service must now submit its decision on the Federal Register by April 15. It is reviewing the best available science and commercial data on the corals to make the determination. However, the federal agency will need to propose rules to list those species warranting protection and accept public comments before finalizing the rule, Sakashita said.

"The settlement is a step toward endangered species protections for corals. In the long-run,

it aims to conserve and recover our vanishing corals so that they'll be around in generations to come," she said. "Listing corals as endangered raises awareness about the risks coral reefs are facing, it triggers a duty that federal activities must ensure that they do not jeopardize corals, and it requires habitat protections."

Activities such as beach renourishment, port development and water pollution could require a federal permit to avoid harming listed corals. Since global warming is a key threat, this also means that projects with major sources of greenhouse gas would have to consult on impacts to corals. It would also make it illegal for anyone to harm or kill endangered species, she said.

The Endangered Species Act requires federal agencies, in consultation with the Fish and Wildlife Service or Fisheries Service, to ensure actions they authorize, fund, or carry out are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any listed species or result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat of such species. The law also prohibits any action with a "taking" of any listed species, including import, export, interstate and foreign commerce.

The nine corals in Hawaii waters being considered for endangered species protection are: *Acropora paniculata* (fuzzy table coral), *Montipora dilatata* (irregular rice coral or Hawaiian reef coral), *Montipora flabellata* (blue rice coral), *Montipora patula* (sandpaper rice coral, spreading coral or ringed rice coral), *Leptoseris incrustans*, *Porites pukoensis*, *Cyphastrea agassizi* (Agassiz's coral), *Cyphastrea ocellina* (ocellated coral) and *Psammocora stellata* (stellar coral), Sakashita said.

Montipora patula is one of the 14 coral species found where the state Department of Land and Natural Resources wants to improve the south end of the Kawaihae Small Boat Harbor. The project has been long delayed by the Department of Land and Natural Resource's failure to fulfill environmental obligations and get a federal permit required for such work.