



ENDANGERED SPECIES:

Coral recovery plan could be first to call for specific cuts to carbon emissions

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A recovery plan for two of the most imperiled coral species in the Florida Keys and Caribbean will be completed next year and will include steps to address threats from climate change, federal managers said today.

The National Marine Fisheries Service pledged to release the plan for elkhorn and staghorn corals in 2014 as part of a settlement agreement with environmentalists reached Friday.

The Center for Biological Diversity sued NMFS in January for failing to finalize a recovery plan for the two corals after they were listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 2006.

Environmentalists are eager to see how the agency addresses ocean warming and acidification -- two of the primary threats to numerous corals -- in the recovery plan. It could be the first time a recovery plan calls for explicit reductions in carbon dioxide emissions, which are the primary driver of warming and acidifying seawater, as well as global climate change.

“The recovery plan could send a strong message that the only way to save corals from extinction is to significantly reduce our carbon dioxide emissions,” said Miyoko Sakashita, oceans director at the Center for Biological Diversity.

But even if the plan identified a level of carbon dioxide emissions needed to preserve corals, it would not be a legal mandate, Sakashita noted.

“Whether the agency moves forward with implementing recovery measures is a matter of political will,” said Jaclyn Lopez, an attorney with CBD who worked on the coral settlement.

The Obama administration has previously declined to use the Endangered Species Act as a way to mandate greenhouse gas emission caps (Greenwire, Feb. 19).

As carbon dioxide emissions have increased in the past century, warming and acidifying seawater are now two of the leading threats to many corals, including elkhorn and staghorn, according to NMFS ecologists.

“There will be actions and criteria that address ocean warming and acidification,” said Alison Moulding, the elkhorn and staghorn coral recovery plan coordinator for NMFS.

“Since ocean warming and acidification are global in nature, they are more difficult to deal with in terms of actions that would address these threats,” Moulding added. “That’s one of the reasons it’s taken quite a while to get this recovery plan out, because it is quite a challenge.”

The Caribbean region has lost up to 97 percent of elkhorn and staghorn corals from disease, hurricanes and bleaching events since the 1980s. The fast-growing, branching species historically formed vast stands along reef fronts, but have been reduced to “rubble fields with few, isolated living colonies,” according to NMFS.

The settlement agreement about the recovery plan was submitted to the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida, Tampa Division, on Friday.

Recovery plans outline goals and specific, measurable criteria for achieving them, such as population size required for delisting. They lay out how to minimize extinction threats and roadblocks to recovery. But they do not have the same regulatory teeth as the initial ESA listing and critical habitat designation, which require federally permitted and funded projects to not harm protected species and their habitat.

The plans identify agencies responsible for specific actions, but whether actions are actually carried out is contingent on funding and other priorities.

While there is no statutory deadline for recovery plans, NMFS agreed to a 2014 date. The time frame is dependent on when the agency finalizes another proposal to list 66 coral species and change the status of elkhorn and staghorn corals to “endangered” (Greenwire, Dec. 3, 2012).

Under the terms of the settlement, if NMFS issues the final rule in December, as required by law, it would release the recovery plan by June. However, if it delays issuing the final rule for six months to collect additional information, the recovery plan would be released in September.

There will be no substantial changes made to the recovery plan if the corals are uplisted to endangered. But managers may include interim goals or criteria for downlisting the species back to threatened, Moulding said.