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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Docket No. NOAA-NOS-2020-0104

Notice of Availability of a Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for the Coral Reef Conservation Program

AGENCY: Office for Coastal Management (OCM), National Ocean Service (NOS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Department of Commerce (DOC).

ACTION: Notice of availability.

SUMMARY: The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Office for Coastal Management has prepared a final programmatic environmental impact statement (PEIS) in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended (NEPA), for its Coral Reef Conservation Program (CRCP), which is managed by NOAA's National Ocean Service in Silver Spring, MD. The CRCP is implemented in coastal areas and marine waters of Florida, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, Gulf of Mexico, Hawaii, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa, the U.S. Pacific Remote Islands, and targeted international regions including the wider Caribbean, the Coral Triangle, the South Pacific, and Micronesia.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Liz Fairey, NMFS Office of Habitat Conservation, NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program, 1315 East West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910, liz.fairey@noaa.gov, [301-427-8632](tel:301-427-8632).

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

On July 11, 2018, NOAA published a Notice of Intent (NOI) in the *Federal Register* to prepare a PEIS for continued operation of NOAA's Coral Reef Conservation Program (CRCP) (83 FR 32099). On December 13, 2019, NOAA published a draft PEIS for coral reef conservation and restoration activities conducted by the CRCP throughout parts of the United States, including the coastal areas and marine waters of Florida, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, Gulf of Mexico, Hawaii, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa, and the U.S. Pacific Remote Islands, and priority international areas (i.e., the wider Caribbean, the Coral Triangle, the South Pacific, and Micronesia). The public comment period for the draft PEIS ended on January 27, 2020. Thirteen comments were received and broken down into components. The final PEIS responds to components of the comments as summarized in Appendix I and was revised as appropriate. The final PEIS assesses the direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts of NOAA's proposed action to continue funding and otherwise conducting coral reef conservation and restoration activities through the CRCP's existing programmatic framework and related procedures. The CRCP is implemented in accordance with the requirements of the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000 and Executive Order 13089. Projects implemented or funded by NOAA vary in terms of their size, complexity, geographic location, and NOAA involvement, and often benefit diverse coral species, habitats, and ecosystem types. The CRCP conducts research and monitoring to gather data on the existence and condition of coral reef ecosystems to support conservation and restoration efforts. NOAA implements the CRCP across four of its line offices (i.e., National Ocean Service, Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research, National Marine Fisheries Service, and National Environmental Satellite, Data,

and Information Service) and in coordination with other federal agencies, state and local agencies, private conservation organizations, and research and academic institutions. A significant amount of this support is administered through grants and cooperative agreements. CRCP activities are prioritized based on available funding and the responsiveness to the priorities in its strategic plan, including jurisdictional needs. The final PEIS identifies and evaluates the general environmental impacts, issues, and concerns related to the comprehensive management and implementation of the CRCP, including potential mitigation. NOAA anticipates that some environmental effects will be caused by site-specific, project-level activities implementing the CRCP; therefore, the final PEIS will be used to support tiered, site-specific National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended (NEPA), reviews by narrowing the scope of environmental impacts and facilitating focused, project-level reviews. NOAA also intends for this final PEIS to establish a tiered environmental decision-making framework that will support efficient compliance with other statutes protecting natural resources, such as the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and Marine Mammal Protection Act, to the extent they apply. Since the CRCP will use the final PEIS to conduct tiered analyses, this document does not evaluate the environmental impacts of any project-level activities.

The final PEIS analyzes three program-level alternatives:

- No Action Alternative: This is the agency's preferred alternative. It involves continued operation of the CRCP based on minimizing the three primary threats to coral reefs (i.e., fishing impacts, land-based sources of pollution, and climate change) and supporting research and possible application of novel coral restoration and intervention techniques to respond rapidly to imminent threats, such as increased bleaching and

disease, to corals and coral reef ecosystems. CRCP operations would include monitoring, research activities, watershed and coral reef restoration, reduction of physical impacts to coral reefs, outreach and education, and program support. The CRCP would continue to be implemented using available appropriations, across four NOAA line offices, using a mix of internal and external funding, across existing geographic areas, and in collaboration with similar partners. The CRCP would continue to conduct program activities with mandatory mitigation measures developed in compliance with applicable environmental laws such as the ESA. For the purposes of this final PEIS, it is assumed that the activities would be conducted in the same manner as they currently are.

- Alternative 1: This alternative reflects the management of the CRCP to address and minimize the three primary threats listed above, but does not include research and possible application of restoration and intervention techniques. The CRCP would continue to be implemented using available appropriations, across four NOAA line offices, using a mix of internal and external funding, across existing geographic areas, and using similar partners. The CRCP would continue to conduct program activities with mandatory mitigation measures developed in compliance with applicable environmental laws such as the ESA.

- Alternative 2: This alternative continues the management of the CRCP to address and minimize the three primary threats and support research and possible application of novel coral restoration and intervention techniques to respond rapidly to imminent threats (i.e., the No Action Alternative) plus the implementation of discretionary mitigation measures. The fundamental difference between this alternative and the other alternatives is that Alternative 2 identifies and implements a suite of standard, discretionary

conservation and mitigation measures that would supplement mandatory mitigation measures required by statutes.

The fundamental distinction between Alternative 1 and the No Action Alternative is that the No Action Alternative includes research and potential application of novel restoration and intervention techniques as tools to respond to imminent threats to corals. The final PEIS considers the environmental effects of these various intervention strategies.

Please visit the CRCP web page for additional information regarding the CRCP:

<https://coralreef.noaa.gov/>

This final PEIS is available for a 30-day waiting period, ending on [*insert 30 days after publication in the **Federal Register***].

AUTHORITY: The preparation of the final PEIS for the CRCP was conducted in accordance with the requirements of NEPA, the Council on Environmental Quality's NEPA regulations (40 CFR parts 1500–1508), other applicable regulations, and NOAA's policies and procedures for compliance with those regulations.

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