

**HAWAI'I CORAL REEF EMERGENCY  
RESPONSE TEAM  
DRAFT IMPLEMENTATION PLAN**

**Prepared by the Working Group on Ecosystem Science and Conservation  
for Presentation to the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force  
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**SUMMARY**

The majority of coastal waters within the State of Hawai'i contain one or more of the five types of coral reefs (reef communities, fringing reefs, patch reefs, barrier reefs or atolls). A large number of people and businesses work within three miles of these reefs, and nearshore water use is increasingly diverse and crowded. The inability of any one agency (Federal, State or otherwise) to adequately and quickly assess and minimize the major impacts of these increased activities raises serious questions about the ability of the State of Hawai'i or the Federal government to protect and enhance U.S. coral reefs.

A series of major environmental disturbances which occurred on Hawaiian coral reefs between September and October 1998 highlight the need for an integrated approach to dealing with anthropogenic degradation of coral reefs. During this time, two shore-based chemical spills occurred, a 40' log washed into a Marine Life Conservation District, and a 80' fishing vessel ran aground at Kure Atoll (perhaps the most isolated and pristine coral reef within the entire 1500 mile-long Hawaiian Island chain). Each of these events was assessed by a different agency without adequate evaluation of the damage to coral reefs or sufficient multi-agency coordination. This lack of coordination prevented timely mitigation and restoration of the affected coral reef resources.

Protection of coral reef resources requires rapid assessment of the potential effects of damaging events through a coordinated, multi-agency response effort: no Federal or State agency has the independent expertise, manpower or resources to assess and deal with the majority of human impacts on coral reefs. We propose to create and equip the first active response team specifically designed for coral reef ecosystems, composed of both Federal and State management, enforcement, and legal agencies. This emergency response team will be based in Hawai'i and serve as a model for other regional teams both in the U.S. and internationally.

**PROPOSED ACTIONS AND STRATEGIES**

The State of Hawai'i, in concert with Hawai'i-based Federal agencies, has taken the first steps in creating a rapid-response team of field biologists and enforcement and legal officials to quickly assess and respond to short-term, anthropogenic events impacting

coral reefs in the State of Hawai'i. This emergency response team includes agencies in Hawai'i which, under State or Federal law, have direct jurisdiction over coral reef habitats or jurisdiction over damage to resources within such habitats, and agencies which, under the guidance of the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force, have been directed to assist and protect such habitats.

The following individuals from State and Federal agencies have been invited to become members of the rapid-response team:

- Coral Reef Biologist, Division of Aquatic Resources/Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources
- Reef Fish Biologist, Division of Aquatic Resources/Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources
- Enforcement Officer, Division of Conservation and Resource Enforcement/Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources
- Deputy Attorney General, Hawai'i Attorney General's Office
- Water Quality Specialist, Hawai'i Department of Health - Clean Water Branch
- Hazard Evaluation Emergency Response Specialist, Hawai'i Department of Health
- Coral Reef Biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Coral Reef Biologist, National Marine Fisheries Service
- Liaison, U.S. Coast Guard
- Liaison, U.S. Navy

This team would be supplemented by University of Hawai'i researchers who focus on ecological assessment; four to six researchers would be involved (two of whom would accompany the team on any given assessment), including specialists in marine botany, corals, reef fish, molecular biology, and ecotoxicology.

The rapid-response team would deploy within 48 hours of an incident to directly assess the impact of the event on coral reef resources. Once in the field, the team would work in consultation with on-site representatives of each island's Division of Aquatic Resources, Department of Health, and County Offices (such as the Oceanographic Unit of the City and County of Honolulu). The team would also initiate and coordinate a multi-agency response to mitigate damage and restore natural resources. Given the necessity of having a short response time, regional coordination, and local knowledge about the area and types of reefs, team members must be located in Hawai'i.

The strength of the proposed Hawai'i emergency response team rests upon its unique composition of State and Federal coral reef field management personnel, the availability of on-site legal and enforcement agencies, the on-site assistance of academic coral reef ecologists and researchers, and the team's specialized training and equipment. We have already established the groundwork for the Hawai'i emergency response team and secured commitments from the State of Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources to provide access to boats and vehicles when necessary on the main Hawaiian Islands. If we can gain additional commitments of support from the U.S. Coral Reef Task

Force Federal agencies, this response team could serve as a rapid assessment tool for events occurring in the State of Hawai'i, where the majority of U.S. reefs are located. In addition, the Hawai'i team could serve as a model, helping spawn additional regional response teams in other coral reef areas.

### **NEEDS FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

1. Funding is needed from the Federal government in order to equip the Hawai'i emergency response team. Without Federal funding, it will be difficult to properly field a joint State-Federal response team. Funding would also be used to start-up the program's capability to deploy the team throughout the Hawaiian Island Chain and reach the areas where most of the harmful accidents are occurring. As of October 1999, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation has notified the response team that they will provide a small grant for \$20,000, far below the \$70,000 necessary to initiate the program.
2. Assessment protocols need to be established for response to different types of accidents that damage coral reefs.
3. Agreements need to be reached as to how the Coral Reef Emergency Response Team will fit into the existing response protocol for Oil Spill Response which is coordinated by the U.S. Coast Guard.
4. State agencies have committed to cover the salaries of their representative team members while deployed with the team. Federal agencies need to provide a similar commitment. If individual agencies cannot provide this funding, a mechanism must be developed to cover the costs of agency involvement with the team. The Department of Justice proposal to create a separate coral reef response fund may provide such a mechanism.
5. Commitments to provide technical assistance and training to the team need to be made by Federal agencies which are not currently participating in the response team (Environmental Protection Agency, US Department of Agriculture, Department of Defense).

### **TIMELINE FOR ACTION**

October 1998: Emergency Response Team idea first proposed at the first U.S. Coral Reef Task Force meeting.

November 1998: State of Hawai'i Department of Land & Natural Resources initiated discussions with other State and Federal partners.

December 1998: State of Hawai'i Department of Land & Natural Resources applied for a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant to support basic equipment for the Hawai'i team. First team meeting of agency representatives. Discussions about formation of a

response team within Ecosystem Science and Conservation and Coastal Uses working groups.

January 1999: Second planning meeting of the Hawai'i response team. An effort was made to find a way to include the team within the existing Oil Spill Response hierarchy while at the same time allowing it to deal with other independent events that harm coral reefs.

February 1999: Recommendation by the Ecosystem Science and Conservation working group to explore a memorandum of agreement between the Federal and State agencies participating on the Hawai'i team.

March 1999: Second U.S. Coral Reef Task Force meeting in Hawai'i. Formal announcement of the formation of a Hawai'i Emergency Response Team for Coral Reefs.

October 1999: Notification by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation of support grant for \$20,000.

**Please address comments and questions regarding the Hawai'i Coral Reef Emergency Response Team to:**

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