



Coral Reef Task Force Comments by the Reef Ball Foundation

My name is Kathy Kirbo and I'm the director of the Reef Ball Foundation. This comment is regarding the oil tanker grounding in Puerto Rico last week and to request the assistance of the task force on this matter.

A 748-foot oil tanker (The Magara) ran aground over a diverse coral reef three miles south of Tallaboa, Puerto Rico, at 1:15 a.m. last Thursday,

The vessel is reported to have been navigating “by site” using land based lights to determine their position and did not request a local pilot. The captain has been tested for intoxication but results have not been published. Given the time of the grounding, fatigue may have been another contributing factor. However, it is inconceivable after historic incidents such as the Exxon Valdez, that a large oil tanker would be navigating near coral reefs without utilizing modern GPS systems and the aid of local pilots. The Margara was over a mile away from the channel designated for use by the tankers entering the port! The grounding coated the seabed with a significant amount of highly toxic tributyl tin (TBT) and destroyed an estimated 79.760 cubic feet of diverse coral reef over at least 3000 square meters of bottom.

When it was removed from the reef which required multiple failed attempts, it rotated around the main grounding site and created many additional grounding scars. These additional impacts might have been avoidable had there been a more careful de-grounding procedure. Additionally, it was reported that they were were advised to use only floating cables for de-grounding, but that sinking cables were used and these created additional damage to the coral reef.

The Reef Ball Foundation, in collaboration CORALations, local scientists and the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources assembled an internationally experienced team to do a rapid assessment of the coral reef impacted by the groundings. Our coalition completed this task Monday and was the first to document the damage. A detailed report, monitoring photos and restoration plan will be posted on the Reef Ball Foundation's website today or tomorrow in draft format. There was no public funding available for this effort and it was funded by NGOs and personal donations of services.

Because of expected high sea surface temperatures this summer, the window for saving the damaged corals is very limited. A restoration plan has been made that will allow the damaged corals to be stabilized, propagated and replanted on prefabricated substrate within the next 90 days. Despite the desire of the DNER to complete the rescue of the damaged corals, it is doubtful that a settlement can be reached with the responsible party and governmental processes could occur to allow this to happen in time. However, the NGO community is well equipped to respond immediately. (Keep in mind that the government of Puerto Rico has been under great stress and for the most part been shut down this week.)

It is our hope that the Coral Reef Task Force can work to facilitate an immediate response so that the damaged coral reef can be recovered and to consider an immediate response policy for future grounds. If you are interested in assisting us, please stop by the Reef Ball Foundation's display booth to learn more or visit our website at: www.reefball.org. Thank you.