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**U.S. CORAL REEF TASK FORCE UNVEILS GROUNDBREAKING PLAN
Will Tackle Major Risks to Economy, Consumers, Environment**

Plan Calls for Protecting 20 Percent of All U.S. Coral Reefs by 2010

In a groundbreaking step, the U.S. Coral Task Force today unveiled the first-ever National Action Plan to comprehensively and aggressively address the most pressing challenges facing coral reefs today. As members of the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) of the U.S. Department of Commerce, the U.S. Department of the Interior and other federal agencies are joining with coastal states and territories to launch this cooperative effort to help save the world's remarkable coral reefs.

U.S. Coral Reef Task Force co-chair Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt said, "I commend everyone whose hard work paid off in developing the National Action Plan. We stand at a very critical point for the preservation of vital coral reefs resources. Today's agreement to protect and set aside 20 percent of coral reefs in this nation's waters by 2010 will increase the long-term survival of coral reefs and the vast array of marine species that depend upon them. The action plan, when implemented, will also lead to more robust economies and safer, healthier futures for people and islands protected and sustained by these ancient and magnificent coral reefs."

"Protecting 20 percent of all U.S. reefs and other decisive actions called for in the new plan is crucial because two-thirds of the world's reefs may be dying. If current conditions continue, an alarming 70 percent of the world's reefs may be gone by 2050. This rapid decline represents a serious threat to businesses, consumers, communities, and the environment," said D. James Baker, Task Force co-chair and NOAA Administrator.

Driven largely by such human activities as pollution, overfishing and dredging, the coral reef crisis places a multitude of human, natural and economic needs in jeopardy. As the "rain forests of the sea," coral reefs provide services estimated to be worth as much as \$375 billion annually, a staggering figure for an ecosystem covering less than one percent of the Earth's surface.

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In the U.S. alone, coral reef ecosystems support millions of jobs. They support billions of dollars in tourism each year, over \$1.2 billion in the Florida Keys alone. In Hawaii, gross revenues

generated from just a single, half square mile coral reef reserve are estimated to exceed \$8.6 million each year.

The annual dockside value of commercial U.S. fisheries from coral reefs is over \$100 million. The annual value of reef-dependent recreational fisheries probably exceeds \$100 million per year. In developing countries, coral reefs contribute about one-quarter of the annual total fish catch, providing food to about one billion people in Asia alone.

Further threatened by the current global reef crisis is the exciting promise of life-saving and other critical pharmaceuticals. Coral reefs are the medicine chests of the 21st century – they are considered to be one of the primary sources of new medicines and biochemicals in the new century. Examples include many pharmaceuticals now being developed as possible cures for cancer, arthritis, viruses, and other diseases.

The new National Action Plan is designed to be the nation's roadmap to more effectively understand coral reef ecosystems and reduce the adverse impacts of human activities. Responding to the urgency of the current situation, the new plan draws on the expertise and commitment of hundreds of public and private stakeholders. The plan calls for:

- Designating 20 percent of all U.S. coral reefs as no-take ecological reserves by 2010. With the fishing community and a broad range of other stakeholders, the existing network of coral reef protected areas will be expanded to ensure the survival of key sites.
- Mapping all U.S. coral reefs by 2009. Right now, just five percent of all U.S. reefs have been adequately mapped. To meet critical management needs, the first priority will be to complete ongoing mapping of Caribbean reefs and reefs on the eight main Hawaiian Islands.
- Monitoring to build an integrated national reef monitoring system that profiles and tracks the healthy of U.S. coral reefs. This monitoring will build on and link existing federal, state and territorial monitoring in addition to implementing new monitoring to, wherever possible, fill in current gaps.
- An All-Islands Coral Reef Initiative to address the highest priorities of U.S. state and territorial islands. Since 1994, the islands of Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin islands, and the Commonwealth of Northern Marianan Islands have been working together to protect and sustainably use coral reefs. In FY 2000, NOAA and the Department of the Interior will provide \$1.35 million to assist U.S. islands to improve coral reef management and protection, including monitoring, education and designation of marine protected areas.