

An underwater photograph of a coral reef. The foreground is dominated by a large, textured coral structure in shades of brown and orange. Several dark-colored fish with white stripes are swimming around the coral. The background is a clear, blue-green water.

US All Islands
Coral Reef
Committee (AIC)

Chair's Report

February 2015 | Washington DC
33rd US Coral Reef Task Force Meeting

US Coral Reef Jurisdictions
and Freely Associated States
PRIORITIES and UPDATES

AIC CHAIR'S REPORT

33rd U.S. Coral Reef Task Force Meeting
Washington DC | February 17-19, 2015

AIC Vision

Thriving coral reef ecosystems, effectively managed to protect their ecological, social, and economic value for future generations.

AIC Mission

To be a unified voice for the effective management of coral reef ecosystems in the U.S. and Freely Associated States.

Cover photo courtesy of R. Schroeder, NOAA.

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From the Chair

Hafa adai, Talofa, Aloha, Hola, and Hello,

It is my pleasure, on behalf of the U.S. All Islands Coral Reef Committee (AIC), to present this report on our activities, accomplishments, and emerging issues since we last met in Maui, HI in September 2014.

The global risk to coral reefs continues to grow and under the *status quo*, coral reefs continue to decline at alarming rates. This situation challenges us to establish the most effective way of working together to achieve priority natural resource management outcomes as well as make wise use of limited resources and be more effective with what we have.



To this end, the **AIC's overarching priorities** focus on achievable and shared site-based and resource-focused outcomes and better integrated and strengthened federal-local partnerships.

We view effective federal-local partnerships as critical for our reefs' future. We believe that jurisdiction and federal managers have unique and essential expertise and authorities that are essential for positive resource outcomes. The U.S. Coral Reef Task Force provides the invaluable opportunity for jurisdiction and federal managers to interact at a national level.

To this, the 33rd USCRTF Meeting, we would like to welcome our Governors, Lt. Governors, and principals and thank them for their continued support of the AIC, local coral reef management, and coral reef conservation across our nation. We would also like to welcome Cheryl Fossani, new USCRTF Executive Secretariat from the Department of the Interior. We look forward to working with her in this new capacity.

We look forward to another successful Task Force meeting and the opportunity to collaborate with federal Task Force member agencies towards thriving coral reef ecosystems, effectively managed to protect their ecological, social, and economic value for future generations.

Sincerely,

Fran Castro
Chair

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AIC OVERARCHING PRIORITIES:

The AIC's overarching priorities cross-cut each of the main issue areas of importance to the AIC and are:

- **Achievable and shared site-based and resource-focused outcomes; and**
- **Integrated and strengthened federal-local partnerships.**

MAIN ISSUE AREA: Global Climate Events



Due to unusually strong warming of ocean temperatures forecasted, 2015 is expected to be the worst coral bleaching event since 1998 – when we functionally lost 15-20% (almost 1/5th) of the world's coral reefs. We must continue to work together, at the local level, to improve conditions and increase resilience and survivorship of our coral reefs; however this does not solve the larger problem of climate change.

If we don't deal with climate change, the root of these issues, we are going to lose. Addressing climate change and associated ocean acidification, sea level rise, and increased storm intensities at the national and international levels is imperative.

The Task Force should have a unified voice to raise the climate change issue to higher levels within the Federal government. Immediate action is needed by the Federal government to take on this carbon emission challenge. Inaction is simply not a viable strategy.

Improved policy development and implementation efforts are critically needed at the federal level if there is to be any hope of vital coral reefs for the future.

The AIC asks that the Task Force be a voice in pushing for the immediate elevation of the climate change issue within the Federal government.

MAIN ISSUE AREA: ESA-listed Coral Species

The AIC greatly appreciates NOAA's collaboration and communication on this issue, particularly from Lance Smith and Ann Garrett, NMFS Pacific Islands Regional Office. We look forward to even greater communication and collaboration in each of our jurisdictions as NOAA considers 4(d) and critical habitat.

The AIC recognizes and supports the need for increased staff capacity for the newly listed coral species as well as the current bottleneck in NOAA's review of permits and projects for existing listed corals (*Acropora*).

As much as possible and reasonable, a balance between resource protection and use should be achieved in any 4(d) rule-making. We recognize that this is no easy task; however the AIC has place-based information and insight, expertise in local resource management, and experience in the potential and unforeseen impacts, at the jurisdiction level, of prohibitions related to threatened corals. And, we are very open to working with NOAA to ensure the best possible outcome.



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With the intent to help achieve this important balance, the AIC submitted the recommendations and requests to NOAA Fisheries in November 2014 for consideration in response to 79 FR 53852.

A few of our comments included:

- Consideration should be given to **activities related to common uses**. For example, common non-destructive fishing and boating activities should be allowed to proceed as usual due to their importance as a local tradition and way of life in coral reef jurisdictions.
- An exemption should be made for **minor accidental impacts** (i.e., we don't want to make innocent people guilty) and thresholds should be defined for what constitutes the maximum allowable impact under this exemption.

We hope that communications will continue and request briefings and consultations from NOAA on this issue moving forward.



MAIN ISSUE AREA: Coral Reef Management Fellowship Program

The Coral Reef Management Fellowship Program directly builds coral reef management capacity at the local level. This program meets the priorities and needs of each AIC jurisdiction in building management capacity at the local level, helps fill identified capacity gaps, meets Management Priority objectives in each jurisdiction as well as the primary objective of the NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program and principles outlined in CRCP's *Roadmap for the Future*. This program also meets one of the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force's strategic and targeted priorities Resolution 25.1. Very few projects or programs do all of these items.

The support, commitment, and partnership, of NOAA and DOI are helping to revitalize this important program and build coral reef management capacity at the local level. We greatly appreciate the support and financial commitment of DOI's Office of Insular Affairs. The AIC is pleased that the joint AIC-NOAA proposal for this program was selected for FY15 internal NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program (CRCP) funding. This funding in addition to contributions from every jurisdiction are keeping this program afloat for the next 1-2 years. After that, funding will again need to be pursued.

For the many reasons listed above, we believe that this program should be one that is formally supported by the USCRTF, where federal agency members are engaged and working with the AIC towards a goal of building an institutionalized program with sustained funding.

The AIC requests the Task Force's formal support of the program and engagement, working with the AIC towards a goal of building an institutionalized program with a sustained source of funding.

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September 2014 Task Force Requests

The AIC put forward two requests for Task Force consideration and action at the September 2014 Steering Committee meeting (9/10/14) and during the Business Meeting (9/11/14).

- 1) **Request for AIC Secretariat Executive Director to serve as 3rd co-chair to the Task Force Steering Committee.**
- 2) **Request that the Task Force better define the partnership and role of the Freely Associated States within the USCRTF.**

As of Tuesday, February 10, 2015, the print date for this report, the AIC had not yet received a formal response to our requests.



Update: AIC Strategic Plan

The AIC Strategic Plan and internal Action Plan have been drafted. These documents have been reviewed by POCs and shared with partners, the NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program and DOI Coral Reef Initiative Program. A big thank you to Karen Koltjes, Jennifer Koss, and Jennifer Moore who took the time to provide very thoughtful and helpful edits, comments, and suggestions for improvement and clarification of our plan.

POCs, with the guidance of the Secretariat, continue to work on the Strategic Plan and have decided to push back the roll-out date to the Fall 2015 U.S. Coral Reef Task Force, allowing more time to spend on thoroughly addressing partner feedback and improving the overall plan. The draft internal Action Plan will be worked on concurrently.

Update: New AIC News & Updates E-newsletter

The AIC has a new email newsletter to help keep partners updated on what we have going on. The newsletter, sent out every two weeks, also includes coral-related grant information, upcoming events and opportunities, media hits, resources, new publications, and the newly posted resources from NOAA CoRIS.

If you're interested, you can sign-up to receive them at <http://allislandscommittee.org/whatwedo/news-updates/>.



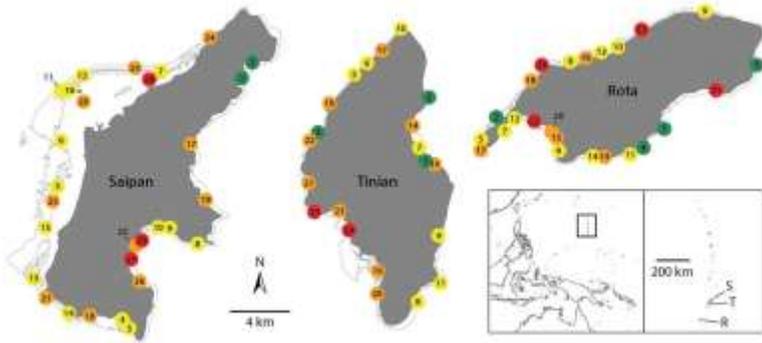
Updates from AIC Jurisdictions

American Samoa

- Interagency Cooperation continues to support Eradication of Crown of Thorns Starfish, which are still present in outbreak numbers.
- The Corrective Action Plan for the Faga'alu Quarry is complete. Monitoring is ongoing to determine effectiveness.
- A Coral ID Training was held to improve capacity of local staff and community members. Measurable improvements were seen in all participants.



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Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

- 2014 expansion of the 2012 Saipan Reef Resilience Study, with improved approach and methodology, to include the islands of Rota, Tinian and Aguijan with funding from NOAA CRCP and USGS.
- 2014 work broadened understanding of relative reef resilience (coral diversity, bleaching resistance, disease, temperature

variability, macroalgae cover, herbivore biomass, sediment and nutrient inputs, and fishing pressure) to include over 80 sites between the four islands.

- Saipan Reef Resilience Study final report will be available early in the spring of 2015.

Florida

- Our Florida Reefs Working Groups drafted ~200 Recommended Management Actions. The Southeast Florida Coral Reef Initiative will review to provide agency, industry, and technical feedback.
- Environmental advocate Philippe Cousteau Jr. recorded a public service announcement promoting Florida's coral reefs and the Our Florida Reefs community planning process.
- Severe bleaching across Florida Reef Tract. Roughly 1/3 of all surveyed corals, and 100% of Pillar corals bleached; mortality presumed high for most species, except Pillar corals.



Guam

- Started 9 years ago, Guardian of the Reef continues annually training high school students to promote protection of coral reef ecosystems to elementary students.
- Coral Reef baseline data continues at 58 sampling stations at Tumon Bay, East Agana Bay, Piti Bay, Achang Reef Marine Preserve, and Cocos Barrier Reef.
- Humatak Community Foundation recruits youths for Coral Reef Ambassadors to coordinate heritage activities like ridge exploration, coral monitoring, and tree planting.



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Hawai'i

- Hawai'i experienced its most severe coral bleaching event on record for the Main Hawaiian Islands. SST reached 86°F. DAR is monitoring recovery.
- Bag and size limits were enacted for parrotfish and goatfish due to important ecosystem services and desirability of these fish.
- The Hā'ena Community-Based Subsistence Fishing Area on the island of Kaua'i was approved by the BLNR to protect native Hawaiian subsistence fishing practices

Puerto Rico

- An External Evaluation of the DNER Corps of Rangers was performed, as recommended by the Puerto Rico Jurisdictional Capacity Assessment Report.
- A Watershed Management Plan for the Fajardo River, East Puerto Rico was prepared.
- A Memorandum of Understanding was signed among administrators of coral farms in Puerto Rico and DNER in order to strengthen communication and collaboration.



U.S. Virgin Islands

- The development of a conceptual plan for the STXEEMP Visitor's Center has been completed. The center will inform visitors on the importance of coral reef ecosystems and the important role MPAs play for the protection of these resources.
- DPNR-CZM partnered with UVI for the expansion of the acoustic monitoring system on the east end of St. Croix. Together with the National Park Service, the movement patterns of key species are monitored as they pass between the territorial and federal boundaries.
- Secured funding from DOI-Office of Insular Affairs to study Great Pond, St. Croix to restore fisheries habitat.

Updates from AIC Affiliate Jurisdictions



Federated States of Micronesia

- Training on FSM Geospatial Information Development and Application for Data and Decision Making, October 21–22, 2014, College of Micronesia-FSM (COM-FSM)
- The training was for applied disaster risk reduction.
- Training was in collaboration with our Pacific Disaster Center, UH Sea Grant, Island Research and Education Initiative, and COM-FSM Partners.

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Republic of the Marshall Islands

- Coral bleaching surveys.
- Woja Conservation Area signs and buoy deployment.
- Transplanting of coral from dredge site.



Republic of Palau

- On September 28th, 15 Palau Community College students learned about DNA and its applications for marine conservation.
- From November 20-21, Palau International Coral Reef Center (PICRC) conducted a 2-day workshop to discuss a potential plan to build capacity of MPA management in Palau as well as highlight and address the main management gaps and needs of each state with MPAs that are part of the Protected Areas Network.
- The Palau Coral Reef and Island Ecosystem (P-CoRIE) Project

held its 2nd Joint Coordinating Committee Meeting on November 25th. This collaborative project (PICRC, Palau Community College, and the University of the Ryukyus) shared their progress on the project after more than a year and discussed the project's activities for the upcoming years. The goal of this meeting was to have the results of this project used for policy formulation and inform management of the coral reef and island ecosystems in Palau.

Acknowledgements

- To our Governors, Lt. Governors, and principals, thank you for your ongoing support of the AIC, local coral reef management, and national coral reef conservation.
- To the Task Force member agencies, particularly NOAA, DOI, EPA, and NRCS, thank you for your continued support and partnership over the years. We look forward to continued collaboration and cooperation.
- To the Steering Committee co-chairs, Shannon and Liza, and Cheryl, our new Task Force DOI Executive Secretariat, thank you for your work in coordinating this meeting.
- To the USCRF Watershed Working Group and Watershed Partnership Initiative Strategy Team, thank you for your quick response in forming the working group and helping ensure clear understanding of our original (September 2014) request. We are also to be a part of the newly formed Watershed Strategy Team and look forward to finalizing the new Watershed Partnership Initiative Strategy.
- Thank you to our Executive Director, Carey Morishige Martinez, and our three Advisors, Gerry Davis, Mike Hamnett, and Bob Richmond, for providing guidance to the AIC and helping ensure that the interests of the jurisdictions are recognized.

AIC Points of Contact and Secretariat

Points of Contact

Ms. Fran Castro, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, AIC Chair
Ms. Damaris Delgado Lopez, Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, AIC Vice Chair
Dr. Ruth Matagi-Tofiga, Territory of American Samoa
Mrs. Lorilee Crisostomo, Territory of Guam
Ms. Joanna Walczak, State of Florida
Ms. Emma Anders, State of Hawai'i
Mr. Jean-Pierre Oriol, Territory of the U.S. Virgin Islands

Affiliate Members

Mr. Don Hess, Republic of the Marshall Islands
Ms. Alissa Takesy, Federated States of Micronesia
Mr. Umiich Sengebau, Republic of Palau

Secretariat

Mr. Gerry Davis, AIC Resource Advisor
Dr. Michael Hamnett, AIC Policy Advisor
Dr. Robert Richmond, AIC Science Advisor
Mrs. Carey Morishige Martinez, Executive Director