



# MEMORANDUM

AGENDA ITEM #8

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DATE: OCTOBER 20, 2017

TO: COUNCIL MEMBERS

FROM: STAFF

SUBJECT: SOUTHEAST FLORIDA CORAL REEF TRACT RESOLUTION TCSF # 17-01

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## Introduction

The Florida Reef Tract (FRT) stretches from St. Lucie Inlet south to the Dry Tortugas (Exhibit A). Within the FRT there are a patchwork of managed areas that extend from Biscayne Bay south. The Southeast Florida Coral Reef Tract (SFCRT) extends from the northern boundary of Biscayne National Park in Miami-Dade County to St. Lucie Inlet in Martin County and comprises one-third of the 360-mile long FRT. While the Florida Keys portion of the FRT is recognized and protected by management plans of the National Marine Sanctuary, National Park, and National Wildlife Refuges; the SFCRT remains unprotected and without a state-adopted management plan addressing its future sustainability. Florida House Bill 53 is being proposed to recognize and demarcate the SFCRT as a conservation area. This is the first step in establishing appropriate management programs and accessing funding for the long-term protection of this resource.

## Background

Southeast Florida reefs support a rich and diverse assemblage of habitats that serve as essential spawning, nursery, breeding, and feeding grounds for numerous species of ecologic and economic importance. This nearshore marine ecosystem is essential for supporting over 71,000 jobs and contributing over \$6 billion to Florida's economy, while annually serving approximately 6 million residents and over 38 million tourists. In addition, coral reefs are the literal first line of defense for our beaches and coastal communities, providing important physical impact and flood reduction protection from severe and frequent tropical events. Coral reefs also manufacture some of the sand that supply our beaches. Together, the Florida and Southeast Florida reef tracts comprise the only living nearshore coral reef ecosystem in the continental United States.

## Analysis

The SFCRT occurs in highly accessible coastal waters near densely populated areas. As a result, this ecosystem is under acute stress from impacts related to extremely high usage year-round and water quality degradation caused by acidification, a recent trend of prolonged and exceptionally warm water temperatures, excessive and extended storm water discharges, and continued operation of septic systems and ocean outfalls for wastewater disposal.

In addition, the SFCRT is suffering from known and unidentified blights. In 2014, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) confirmed that a significant coral disease outbreak began to spread into multiple sites in the Miami-Dade County portion of the unprotected portion of the SFCRT. Coral diseases continued to spread north to Martin County reefs and south to the upper Florida Keys during the summer of 2017. NOAA's Coral Disease and Health Consortium reports that diseases and diminishing health conditions among corals in the Florida Reef Tract have dramatically increased in frequency and severity during the past decade. The extent and number of species of corals that have been affected has been dramatic. Recent reef surveys suggest that 21 coral species are suffering from multiple diseases. Seven of those species are listed as "threatened" under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

### Conclusion

Disease outbreaks, extended coral bleaching events, and water quality-related impacts are causing significant stress and damage to the entire Florida Reef Tract. The SFCRT portion of this 360-mile long reef system remains unmanaged and is particularly vulnerable to degradation because of its highly accessible location adjacent to large coastal populations.

The Treasure Coast and South Florida Regional Planning Councils (RPCs) recognize the ecological function and value of SFCRT and its important contribution to the region's economy. The RPCs have a regional interest in supporting and advancing efforts to protect and restore the SFCRT and the entire Florida Reef Tract.

Last year the RPCs supported legislation resulting in \$1 million being allocated by the Legislature through FDEP for a baseline water quality monitoring program for the SFCRT and coral disease response projects for the entire Florida Reef Tract. House Bill 53 lends support to continued reef protection efforts. FDEP is also placing \$1 million in its 2017/2018 agency budget request to continue the previous year's work on water quality monitoring and disease response.

### Recommendation

The Treasure Coast and South Florida Regional Planning Councils should jointly adopt and transmit Resolution TCSF 17-01 to the Governor, Senate President, House Speaker, the region's Legislative Delegation, counties, municipalities, and economic and tourism development organizations of the Treasure Coast and South Florida regions, the Secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and the Executive Director of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Attachments

## **DRAFT – SUBJECT TO MODIFICATIONS**

### **RESOLUTION TCSF #17-01**

**A JOINT RESOLUTION OF THE SOUTH FLORIDA AND TREASURE COAST REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCILS REPRESENTING THE LOCAL GOVERNMENTS OF MONROE, MIAMI-DADE, BROWARD, INDIAN RIVER, MARTIN, PALM BEACH, AND ST. LUCIE COUNTIES, FLORIDA, SUPPORTING HOUSE BILL 53 ESTABLISHING THE SOUTHEAST FLORIDA CORAL REEF ECOSYSTEM CONSERVATION AREA; URGING THE FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION TO DEVELOP A MANAGEMENT PLAN; AND URGING THE FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND THE SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT TO IMPLEMENT ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES TO GREATLY REDUCE NUTRIENT LOADING FROM ALL HUMAN SOURCES AND PATHWAYS AS A MATTER OF URGENCY**

**WHEREAS**, economically and ecologically valuable nearshore coral reef resources are found in Florida coastal waters from Martin County to the Dry Tortugas in Monroe County and comprise the Florida Reef Tract – the only coral reef tract in the continental United States (Exhibit A); and

**WHEREAS**, the Southeast Florida Coral Reef Tract stretches from Miami-Dade County (north of Biscayne National Park) to St. Lucie Inlet in Martin County and comprises one third of the 360-mile long Florida Reef Tract; and

**WHEREAS**, coral reefs are the literal first line of defense for our beaches and coastal communities, providing invaluable physical impact and flood reduction protection from increasingly severe and frequent tropical storm events; and

**WHEREAS**, coastal waters, coral reefs, and the aquatic life they support are essential in sustaining over 71,000 jobs and contributing over \$6 billion to Florida’s economy while serving approximately 6 million residents and over 38 million visitors annually; and

**WHEREAS**, the Florida Keys portion of the Florida Reef Tract is recognized and protected by management plans of the National Marine Sanctuary, National Parks, and National Wildlife Refuges; however, the Southeast Florida Coral Reef Tract remains unprotected and without a state-adopted management plan addressing its future sustainability; and

**WHEREAS**, the highly-accessible Southeast Florida Coral Reef Tract has experienced impacts from extremely high usage year-round and from water quality degradation caused by numerous factors including: prolonged periods of exceptionally warm water temperatures, acidification; and from direct human inputs such as: excessive and prolonged stormwater discharge events and the continued operation of ocean outfalls and septic systems; and

**WHEREAS**, disease outbreaks are occurring along the entire Florida Reef Tract that have quickly spread and include multiple diseases which have impacted over 21 species of reef-building stony corals, including several listed as threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and the State Imperiled Species Management Plan; and

**WHEREAS**, the Treasure Coast and South Florida Regional Planning Councils (“RPCs”) recognize the value of the entire Florida Reef Tract and its important contribution to the region’s economy and ecology; and

**WHEREAS**, the RPC’s desire to support and advance the protection and restoration of the Florida Reef Tract.

**NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED JOINTLY BY THE SOUTH FLORIDA AND TREASURE COAST REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCILS, THAT THEY:**

- 1) Endorse and support House Bill 53, establishing the boundaries of the Southeast Florida Coral Reef Ecosystem Conservation Area, and urge responsible agencies, including the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (“FDEP”) Coral Reef Conservation Program to develop a Southeast Florida Coral Reef Ecosystem Management Plan for the purpose of mitigating reef diseases, and water quality impacts, while maintaining a healthy and sustainable Southeast Florida Coral Reef Tract; and
- 2) Urge the FDEP and the South Florida Water Management District to develop and implement strategies to greatly reduce nutrient loading from all human sources and pathways as a matter of urgency, including surface water management initiatives of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and Central Everglades Planning Project; and
- 3) Encourage FDEP to establish, at a minimum, a recurring annual agency budget request of \$1 million for the purpose of water quality monitoring and coral disease response and mitigation for the Florida Reef Tract; and
- 4) That this Resolution shall take effect immediately upon adoption hereof.

**DULY ADOPTED** by the Treasure Coast and South Florida Regional Planning Councils this 20<sup>th</sup> day of October, 2017.

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Doug Smith  
Chairman, TCRPC

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Tim Daubert  
Chairman, SFRPC

# EXHIBIT A

