

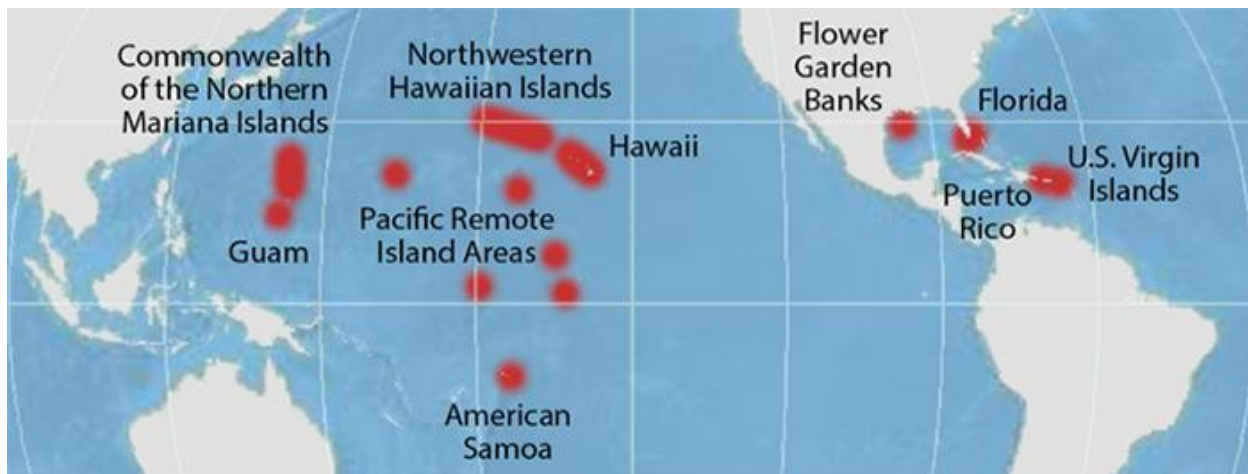


Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

May 6, 2021

Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz, and my colleagues on the committee,

We have over 10 major coral reefs systems in the United States. America's reefs are under threat like others across the world. It is fitting to review the challenges our reefs face in the Natural Resource Committee since some are in states, but so many more of America's reefs are in the territories. These include:



The Great Florida Reef

third largest coral barrier reef system in the world.

The Hawaiian Coral Reef

A Massive 1200-mile reef system in the Central Pacific that account for about 85 percent of all coral reefs in the United States.

In the North western Hawaiian Islands

Papahānaumokuākea, Marine National Monument.

In Texas and Louisiana

The Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary is located 70 to 115 miles off their coasts.

Puerto Rico

The Isla Verde Coral Reef Marine Reserve – just off San Juan.

Virgin Islands

Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument –
Is a 3-mile coral belt off the island of St. John.

Samoa

The National Park of American Samoa



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Is distributed on four volcanic islands including Tutuila Island

Northern Mariana Islands

Has the oldest, most developed reefs on southern islands and most diverse reefs in Saipan.

Guam

42 square miles of reefs and Cora gardens surround the island along with other reefs in deeper waters

And Pacific Remote Island.

Our coral reefs are under attack by ocean acidification and warming seas caused by climate change as well as waste-water pollution. In turn, these challenges make America's coral reefs more vulnerable to coral bleaching, stony coral tissue loss disease, among others.

Here's an example of the decline of the Great Florida Reef by USGS:



USGS describes in its assessment "Like many reefs around the world, Florida's reefs have experienced significant coral loss in recent decades from coral bleaching, disease, and human-related disturbances." Here's an example of the decline of the Hawaiian Coral Reef by USGS:



There, the USGS specifically found:



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“Coral reefs along densely populated shorelines are especially vulnerable to the effects of ocean acidification amplified by local pollution. Corals around the world are already stressed by ocean acidification—the gradual decline in seawater pH as the ocean absorbs increasing amounts of CO₂ from the atmosphere.”

USGS goes on to state that “polluted, low-pH groundwater discharging onto a shallow coral reef off” such as Kahekili Beach Park in west Maui, Hawai‘i “further increases seawater acidity and exposes corals to nitrate concentrations 50 times higher than normal. Such land-based pollution could contribute to the collapse of coastal coral reef ecosystems sooner than predicted based on ocean acidification alone.”

We filed the bipartisan Restoring Resilient Reefs Act to address many of these major challenges facing America’s reefs:

The Restoring Resilient Reefs Act (RRRA) reauthorizes the Coral Reef Conservation Act (CRCA), which expired nearly fifteen years ago. It maintains the NOAA Coral Reef program, while also introducing overdue improvements to coral management and restoration efforts and giving innovative new tools to partners who are closest to this crisis: states, territories, tribes, communities, and universities.

KEY PROVISIONS:

- A 5-year authorization with an explicit focus on restoration activities where natural disasters and human activities have degraded reef ecosystems. This program is currently funded at \$33M for 2021 but without further direction by Congress.
- Creates a block grant program where states and territories can receive federal “matching funds” for the prior year’s coral expenditures, provided they have an action plan in place, which will incentivize increased state and local investment of in coral reef management capacity.

Intergovernmental partnerships are key for water infrastructure upgrades, pollution mitigation efforts and regrowing reefs.

- Allows for the formation of a public-private partnerships for coral management, called “Coral Stewardship Partnerships.”
- Public-Private partnerships are critical for sharing researching



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- Authorizes the U.S Coral Reef Task Force, to ensure states, territories, and other stakeholders continue to have a voice in U.S coral reef management. Public feedback is essential.
- Establishes of a single streamlined set of guidelines for “action plans” to implement the national strategy, with maximum flexibility given to state and local authorities. These action plans will focus restoration efforts more effectively
- Allows for emergency grants and emergency funds for coral disasters. - This will assist with Hurricanes, typhoons, tsunamis, as well as oil spills and other major pollution events

Thank you to Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz and fellow subcommittee members for the opportunity to discuss the Restoring Resilient Reefs Act and help save America’s reefs!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Darren Soto".

Darren Soto
Member of Congress