

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII AT MANOA

Kewalo Marine Laboratory
Pacific Biosciences Research Center
41 Ahui Street, Honolulu, HI 96813

April 30, 2021

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Huffman and Committee Members,

I am providing this testimony in support of H.R. 160, *Restoring Resilient Reefs Act of 2021* (Rep. Darren Soto, D-FL), To reauthorize the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000 and to establish the United States Coral Reef Task Force, and for other purposes.

For context, the three key points I feel are foundational to understanding the need and urgency for this legislation:

- Coral Reefs are ecosystems that provide resources of substantial Economic, Ecological, Social and Cultural value. A recent study valued coastal housing and infrastructure protection alone at over \$1.8 billion to our country, with annual benefits of over \$800 million per year.
- These centers of rich biodiversity, natural products of biomedical application, fisheries resources of economic and subsistence value, provide livelihoods supported by reef-related recreation and tourism and support cultural practices steeped in traditional ecological knowledge. They are also, unfortunately, in steep decline in U.S. waters and world-wide, due to multiple human-induced disturbances, and if we were to simply save what remains today, we will have failed in our stewardship responsibilities to present and future generations of Americans.
- H.R. 160 provides an essential framework and funds for supporting partnerships among Federal agencies, jurisdictional governments, researchers, managers, policy makers and stakeholders to arrest and reverse the downward trajectory of our precious coral reefs and the benefits they provide to those who depend on them.

I would recommend the following source materials for Representatives and Congressional staff:

- National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine report, funded by NOAA (free online) on Coral Reef Interventions - <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/25279/a-research-review-of-interventions-to-increase-the-persistence-and-resilience-of-coral-reefs>
- Short summaries from this in-depth report are accessible via a menu-driven table - <http://nas-sites.org/dels/coral-interventions-table/>
- An interactive figure provides an overview of the intervention options, many of which would be undertaken if and when this Bill is passed - <https://www.nap.edu/resource/25279/interactive/>

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It is also worth noting Australia's response to the decline of their coral reefs:

- Australia's investment in reef management has been approved at \$377 million US: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/04/30/607037119/australia-investing-377-million-to-protect-great-barrier-reef>

I provide the following feedback and recommendations on specific elements of the Bill:

Positive and important: H.R. 160

- Provides definitions of key terms for Coral, Coral Reefs and Coral Reef Ecosystems, to support regulatory and management-directed actions and responses at both the Federal and jurisdictional levels.
- Provides additional funding over the next 5 years, including an increase in percentage of funds going directly to jurisdictional coral reef management agencies for on-the-ground activities without a cut to core NOAA programs.
- Goes beyond simply reauthorizing the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000, by addressing the changes that have occurred over the past 21 years, including improved scientific knowledge, emerging challenges tied to climate change and disease outbreaks, a greater understanding of the true value of the natural capital coral reefs provide and protect, and harnessing the increased capacity of the partners.
- Provides Block Grants to the States, Commonwealths and Territories – allowing for increased flexibility for jurisdictional managers to react and respond to coral reef threats and losses.
- Establishes an emergency fund to improve capacity for disaster response, as well as for the development of coral reef emergency response plans.
- Codifies the US Coral Reef Task Force for the first time since its establishment in 1998.
- Codifies the Coral Reef Fellows Program.

Issues, Opportunities and Concerns:

- Adding non-voting seats for Fisheries Management Councils to the USCRTF - Concerns exist over confusion from having two governor appointed representatives as principals – Each jurisdiction should only have one representative. Also, the Fisheries Management Councils have other mandates that can be in conflict with the stated goals and objectives of the USCRTF.
- Definitions – it would be helpful to add one in Section 218, following that of “(6) Coral Reef Ecosystem,” for key and valuable *ecosystem services* as a means of supporting further Federal program engagement: (7) Coral Reef Ecosystem Services – those attributes and benefits provided by coral reef ecosystems including protection of coastal

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beaches, structures and infrastructure; habitat for a multitude of organisms of economic, ecological, biomedical, medicinal and cultural value; centers for the promulgation, performance and training of cultural practices representative of traditional ecological knowledge; and aesthetic appreciation.” These services define the importance of coral reef ecosystems to human livelihoods, health and safety.

- Page 8, lines 16 – 18, should change from “(2) LIMITATION. —The Administrator may not provide more than \$500,000 in total funding under paragraph (1) to any one State in any fiscal year.” To “not provide less than...”. That is, use the \$500,000 amount as a floor rather than a ceiling.
- Matching waivers: As written, there are several sections where matching and waivers are discussed, creating potential confusion. As this is a very important issue, particularly for the Territories, Commonwealths and Freely Associated States, one unified section identifying all circumstances under which waivers are applicable would be helpful. Matching waivers should apply to all programmatic and project funds, as some jurisdictions, especially following economic downturns related to COVID-19 and the loss of tourism, will be unable to meet a matching requirement. There may also be a conflict with pre-existing legislation that removed the first \$250,000 in matching for Territories for a number of Federal programs.
- Block Grants versus Cooperative Agreements: allow for either in response to jurisdictional capacity and accountability needs.
- Institutes – These should be established and designed to serve the priority needs of both jurisdictional and Federal resource managers and associated stakeholders, hence details should be provided to determine the appropriateness and roles of partnering organizations: Non-profits/NGO’s? Educational institutions in partnership with local agencies? NCRI/HCRI/CCRI/WPCRI versus or in collaboration with JIMAR (<https://www.soest.hawaii.edu/jimar/>) and CIMAS (<https://ci.noaa.gov/Locations/CIMAS/CIMAS-NCE>)? Focus on both the production of actionable science and the development of local capacity. Encourage partnerships, with the local management agencies in the leadership position.
- Department of the Interior: should they have a dedicated appropriation and if so, to the Office of Insular Affairs to facilitate grants to the Territories, Commonwealths and Freely Associated States, USGS, Park Service? This best supports the equitably approach used by the States and Territories in providing the best mechanism to distribute funds equally and efficiently.
- NOAA has extensive technical expertise and infrastructure of substantial value to meeting the goals and objectives of this bill and the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force, however, its role is most appropriate through partnerships with the local jurisdictions, respecting and addressing local priorities.
- An increase in the budget is strongly suggested, considering the value of coral reefs to our nation and the urgency of responses and interventions at scales that matter. If Australia can invest over \$377 million in their reefs, perhaps the U.S. can provide at least 25% of this. The present funding levels identified in the Bill actually result in an overall reduction of financial support over time due to increasing costs.

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As I have over 47 years of experience as a coral reef scientist who has worked closely with policy makers, managers and stakeholders in both the Atlantic/Caribbean and Pacific Islands, and have been directly involved with the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force since its inception in 1998, helped draft E.O. 13089 on Coral Reef Conservation and contributed to the drafting of both the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000 and subsequent bills for its reauthorization, I am happy to provide additional information, background and insight to the committee and its staff going forward. Please feel free to contact me if I can provide any additional information or documentation.

Respectfully,

Robert H. Richmond

Robert H. Richmond, Ph.D.
Research Professor and Director
Science Advisor, U.S. All Islands Coral Reef Committee, U.S. Coral Reef Task Force
Pew Fellow in Marine Conservation
Past President, International Coral Reef Society