TESTIMONY OF CRAIG MANSON, ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE AND PARKS, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS, HOUSE RESOURCES COMMITTEE, REGARDING THE CONSERVATION OF CORAL REEFS

March 1, 2005

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you again to update the Subcommittee on our coral reef conservation efforts. As part of my duties as Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, the Secretary has delegated to me the role of Co-Chairman of the United States Coral Reef Task Force. I am pleased to report significant accomplishments by the Task Force since your last hearing.

Let me begin by saying that the Administration recently recognized the importance of protection and conserving corals in the U.S. Ocean Action Plan, the Administration's response to the report and recommendations of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, which was released on December 17, 2004. We look forward to being a part of that process.

Executive Order 13089, issued in June 1998, established the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force. The chairmanship is shared jointly by the Departments of Interior and Commerce, with other federal members including the Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Homeland Security (Coast Guard), Justice, State and Transportation, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the National Science Foundation and the Agency for International Development. Governors of the Territories and the Associated States have also been asked by the Task Force to join, and they have played an invaluable role with the Task Force.

The Department of the Interior co-chairs the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force, along with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in the Department of Commerce, in part because we have over 3.6 million acres of coral reefs and associated habitats under our jurisdiction, mostly in National Wildlife Refuges and National Parks. Within the Department, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the National Park Service (NPS), the Minerals Management Service (MMS), the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and the Office of Insular Affairs have responsibilities for coral reef research and conservation.

In 2000, the Task Force developed and approved a National Action Plan to carry out its Executive Order mandate. In 2002, NOAA, with the Task Force, developed a National Action Strategy under the provisions of the Coral Reef Conservation Act to prioritize the activities in the Plan.

The Task Force has subsequently undertaken two steps that I believe are major advances in our coral research and conservation efforts. First, through research and conservation efforts, the Task Force has established priorities for action. We voted in our Fall 2002 meeting to designate land-based sources of pollution, over-fishing, recreational misuse, lack of public understanding (of the needs and importance of coral reefs), disease and climate change/coral bleaching as the priority issues we would address.

Second, and more importantly, we have gone beyond the planning stage by encouraging the states

and islands to develop and implement Local Action Strategies for conserving their coral resources, focused on these new priorities.

This is not a new planning effort, but rather an effort to ensure that each jurisdiction is involved in carrying out these important actions. In each jurisdiction, the decisions on what actions to undertake were based on community input, generally through extensive public meetings, so we have secured a locally-driven set of priorities that contribute to national goals for coral reef conservation. I am sure that the representatives from the states and territories that you will hear from today will discuss this in more detail.

In fiscal year 2004, the FWS provided $200,000 in unrestricted funding to the Pacific Islands – Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) – to help get this effort started, and the NPS detailed an experienced planner to CNMI to assist in developing their plan in 2003.

Support for the Local Action Strategies is one of the key elements of the coral reef segment of the Administration's Ocean Action Plan. Other elements of the Plan that pertain to coral reefs include protecting the Northwest Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve and re-establishing the Interagency Marine Debris Coordinating Committee, both aimed in part at addressing the impacts of derelict fishing gear on coral reefs. In that regard, I have provided the Chairman with a photograph of lost or abandoned fishing nets removed from the reefs at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge and two adjacent islands, a very remote location closed to commercial fishing, by a joint FWS-NOAA effort in 2003. This may serve to illustrate the scale of this issue.

The Office of Insular Affairs, in cooperation with NOAA, annually provides technical and financial assistance to the U.S. territories to improve management and protection of their coral reefs. Grant awards typically range from $300,000 - 400,000. Notable accomplishments achieved through this grant program include the declaration of new protected areas, assessments of reef health, the establishment of local coral reef advisory groups, the development of community-based management plans and the development of culturally-appropriate education materials. The Office of Insular Affairs also annually provides coral reef funding to the Freely Associated States. These funds have produced milestones such as the *Blueprint for Conserving the Biodiversity of the Federated States of Micronesia*, a framework for creating the first national system of protected areas for the Federated States of Micronesia, as well as the first-ever assessments of the coral reef ecosystems of the Marshall Islands.

Another element of the Administration's strategy is promoting involvement by recreational and agricultural interests in coral reef conservation. Last fall, Deputy Secretary of the Interior Steven Griles signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Boat Owners Association of America, commonly known as BoatUS, for joint environmental education and other efforts at coral reef conservation. We are working to involve other large membership organizations whose members benefit from healthy coral reef ecosystems. The strategy also includes scientific research to provide a sound framework for restoration and conservation of coral reef ecosystems worldwide.

The Department of Agriculture is providing funding to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for grants to private lands programs that benefit coral reefs through enhancing riparian water quality, and outreach and environmental education programs.

On the scientific end, the Strategy includes EPA's development of biological criteria for water quality in the vicinity of coral reefs. A variety of efforts to better understand and conserve deep-sea corals, which are not within the current mandate of the Coral Reef Task Force, are being undertaken by the MMS and the USGS.

On that subject, the MMS initiated the first investigation of the distribution and extent of deepwater corals habitats in the northern Gulf of Mexico in 2004 using manned submersibles. Recent surveys on the Gulf of Mexico continental slope have demonstrated the existence of significant assemblages of living *Lophelia* corals. This is a 3-year program conducted by MMS and USGS.

Internationally, the strategy calls for forming new international partnerships. As one element of this, the United States will seek to host the secretariat of the International Coral Reef Initiative for 2005-2007. The Initiative is the coordinating body for international scientific and governmental efforts to protect coral reefs and associated ecosystems.

In a related matter, the Task Force endorsed and the United States has been awarded the next International Coral Reef Symposium (ICRS), which will be held in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, from July 7th through 11th, 2008. Every 4 years, under the sponsorship of the International Society for Reef Studies, coral reef biologists, ecologists, economists, environmentalists, geologists, resource managers, and others working in coral reefs worldwide meet together at an ICRS to share the latest knowledge and to advance the science on a global scale. There are likely to be more than 2,000 scientists, students and managers at this event.

Returning to the Local Action Strategies, I am proud to note that the states and territories have done such a good job of justifying the projects and making them partnership efforts that the Administration has expressly requested an increase of $1.5 million within the NOAA budget to help fund them. The Interior budget includes $1.4 million for ongoing programs in USGS, FWS, and the Office of Insular Affairs that support local action strategies.

In light of current fiscal restraint, I believe this represents a commitment by the Administration to the Local Action Strategy approach to coral conservation that is more significant than the dollar amounts might indicate.

I want to note here that this approach, building up from local priorities and involving residents and partnerships, has been highly effective in a number of major wildlife conservation initiatives with which the Subcommittee is familiar, such as the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, and I am hopeful that we can achieve similar results, even if initially on a smaller scale, for coral.

At our fall 2003 meeting, the Task Force endorsed a proposal from the Pacific Islands urging that federal disaster response efforts include provisions to address damage to natural resources, and particularly removal of debris from coral reefs. The final National Response Plan, adopted last fall, contains such an emergency support function, to be led by the Department of the Interior, in cooperation with NOAA and the Department of Agriculture.

I am also pleased to report that the Army Corps of Engineers, whose permitting authority can play an enormously significant role in protecting coral reefs, has begun to play an active role in the Task Force, both at the staff and policy levels. A number of significant accomplishments by the Army

Corps of Engineers will be found in our pending report.

Another issue that is important to coral protection in the islands is water quality, as pollution and sedimentation are among the most significant threats to reefs. Water quality is also important to human health. The Task Force has passed resolutions endorsing actions to address these issues for both the Pacific and Caribbean islands, but actual resolution of these problems is beyond the scope of what the Task Force itself can accomplish.

However, there are other forums in which this issue is being addressed.

President Bush issued an Executive Order in May 2003 creating an Interagency Group on Insular Areas (IGIA), chaired by Secretary Norton. Other members include EPA, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Army Corps of Engineers. Congress has now requested the IGIA to prepare a plan to implement necessary infrastructure projects in the insular areas, as determined by an Army Corps of Engineers analysis. Water quality is one of the priority issues being addressed.

The IGIA will consider recommendations at their meeting today. Among the options being considered is a territorial bond bank, which would allow the territories to pool their projects together and borrow at a lower cost. The final plan is due by the end of this July.

In addition, the Office of Insular Affairs on February 14 made a grant of over $4,000,000 to the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) to assist in improving their wastewater treatment facilities.

On the international front, we also have some significant accomplishments. At last year's conference of the parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), we successfully led efforts to list the humphead wrasse, an important coral reef species, on Appendix II. We defeated efforts to revise the distinction between live and fossil coral in a way that could have defined live coral as "fossil", which could have legalized currently illegal trade in live coral. At the 2002 meeting, held after the Subcommittee's prior coral reef oversight hearing, the United States successfully proposed listing all 33 species of seahorses (genus *Hippocampus*), also important reef species, in Appendix II.

And at the practical level, the USGS has led an effort to upgrade and make more user-friendly the Task Force web site. Although this is still a work in progress, those of you who have not visited the site recently (www.coralreef.gov) will see a significant improvement.

Mr. Chairman, you also asked that we comment on the operation of the Coral Reef Conservation Act. Because the Department of the Interior is not authorized to conduct coral-related activities in that Act, we have no experience in its operation. However, we are consulting with NOAA on reauthorization of the Act.

Turning to activities at the Department of the Interior, I have a number of developments to report.

Our expenditures for coral reef conservation have increased over the last several years. These are detailed in the chart attached to my statement, but in summary they are:

DOI CORAL REEF FUNDING (in thousands)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006 (request)
FWS	1,907	3,909	3,919	4,136	4,147
MMS	175	100	450	100	125
NPS	3,848	4,208	4,166	4,124	4,124
OIA	500	500	494	493	500
USGS	3,500	3,500	4,938	4,625	4,625
TOTAL:	9,930	12,127	14,057	13,478	13,521

I want to point out that because we lack express statutory authority for coral reef activities outside of our own lands and waters, much of the funding is going to programs which are primarily aimed at land-based problems whose solution also benefits coral reefs, or to research related to Departmental lands and waters and on-going programs which also benefits coral reefs. The primary exception to this is in the Office of Insular Affairs grants to the territories, which are used directly for their coral reef conservation activities.

Highlights of what we have accomplished with this funding include:

At the request of the Task Force, FWS, in cooperation with state, island and federal resource agencies, conducted a review of all federally-permitted construction projects in Hawaii, and then in Florida and the Caribbean, from 1985 to the present, to estimate the impacts to coral reefs, determine how much mitigation had been required and accomplished, and make recommendations to increase avoidance and improve mitigation. We have provided the Committee with copies of the reports. As a result, the Task Force has recommended that the agencies form area-based working groups to better coordinate permit issuance and mitigation efforts.

In addition, FWS is working with NOAA, the Army Corps of Engineers, and several state agencies to assess impacts to Florida's coastal resources that resulted from the remarkable 2004 hurricane season, and to determine appropriate response. The Army Corps of Engineers is in the process of restoring federal beach renourishment projects in six south Florida counties. Impacts to nearshore reefs as well as reefs adjacent to or within the proposed borrow sites, are being assessed. The level of coordination and consultation required for these civil works projects as a result of hurricanes is unprecedented.

Biscayne National Park is working with the State of Florida to develop a joint Fisheries Management Plan in the Park and adjacent waters, transcending state and federal boundaries to protect and manage reef fish and reduce damage from fishing gear. The Park established a citizen's working group with anglers, commercial fishermen, Scuba divers, and environmental group representatives to assist with developing this plan.

As a result of investigative work by FWS law enforcement personnel, the Department of Justice obtained convictions of five people for attempting to smuggle more than 141 tons of Hawaiian live rock and coral into California. Their penalties included requirements for payment of over $150,000 in restitution to the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources. Charges are pending against

two other people in this case.
The Task Force has set a goal of producing comprehensive digital maps of all U.S. shallow coral reefs by 2009. This work is being done jointly by USGS, NOAA, NASA, other federal and state agencies, and academic and nongovernmental organizations. Between 2002 and 2004, the percentage of mapped areas increased from 35 to 66 percent.

The Office of Insular Affairs provided $200,000 to the NPS to conduct the initial site planning and evaluation for a proposed new research and education center at Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Preserve, St. Croix, USVI. The partnership also includes the Joint Institute for Caribbean Marine Studies, a consortium of universities. The "Salt River Bay Marine Research and Education Center" will be dedicated to research on the health and sustainability of coral reef and other tropical marine systems, student education, and public awareness of the economical and cultural heritage associated with the tropical oceans.

In September 2003, USGS tested a new underwater video system designed for rapid ground-truthing of habitat maps derived from remote sensing data. Using this new technology, USGS created fine-scale preliminary topographic maps for coral reefs in Biscayne National Park and portions of the northern Florida Keys. USGS scientists in collaboration with NASA are also mapping coral reef ecosystems using the Experimental Advanced Airborne Research LIDAR (EAARL). EAARL is a new airborne LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) technique that provides unprecedented capabilities to survey coral reefs in water 10 m deep or less, nearshore benthic habitats, coastal vegetation, and sandy beaches.

In 2003, the Department implemented regulations to protect the new 12,708-acre U.S. Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument and the newly expanded 19,000-acre Buck Island Reef National Monument. The regulations had been delayed while Government Accountability Office reviewed ownership claims to the area advanced by the territorial government. Management plans are now under development for both areas. In related actions, USGS and NPS, with support from The Disney Wildlife and Conservation Fund and University of the Virgin Islands biologists, have documented and mapped the prevalence of white pox disease at 12 additional reef zones around St. John. A major finding is that white pox does not seem to be correlated with human sewage as it is in the Florida Keys, but rather with higher seawater temperatures are highest.

USGS is also supporting research on major reef-building corals in three national parks (Virgin Islands National Park, Biscayne National Park, and Buck Island Reef National Monument). NPS biologists and volunteers are working with the USGS scientists in monthly monitoring of reefs for disease and other factors that could prevent coral recovery. The main focus is on elkhorn coral which is under consideration for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

In 2002, at the request of the people of Rongelap Atoll, FWS, with funding from the Office of Insular Affairs, led a multi-institutional expedition to assess conditions at the protected, uninhabited reef of Ailinginae Atoll in the Republic of the Marshall Islands and to evaluate its eligibility as a World Heritage Site. Participants included the College of the Marshall Islands, University of North Queensland, and University of California at Santa Cruz. State-of-the-art, high-resolution Quickbird satellite imagery assisted in the evaluation. Shortly after the expedition, the Republic of the Marshall Islands declared Ailinginae to be its first national park. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's World Heritage Centre should shortly begin its evaluation of the atoll.

USGS scientists, along with their partners and collaborators, have been assessing the relationship between African dust storm events and the outbreaks of disease on reef systems in the Caribbean. Over 200 species of microorganism have been identified from air samples taken in the Virgin Islands during dust and non-dust conditions. Air samples collected during dust events in the USVI contain 8-10 times as many microorganisms per volume as do air samples collected during non-dust conditions. Twenty-five percent are known plant pathogens and 10 percent are known opportunistic pathogens of humans. A pilot study showed dust collected in the VI during African dust conditions to be toxic to some marine organisms. The pathogenic strain of the fungus known to cause sea fan disease and mortality of sea fans throughout the Caribbean region has been isolated from lesions on diseased sea fans in the USVI and from soil in the Sahel, a region in Mali, Africa.

The NPS has initiated community-based marine management planning at Kalaupapa National Historical Park, Hawaii, which includes 2,000 acres of coral reefs in an adjacent marine area. Meetings were held in coordination with the Kalaupapa community to identify and prioritize options for a community-based approach to the park's marine management programs. These options include community participation in selecting monitoring programs, establishing special management areas in the park, and developing a legislative proposal for incorporating, in perpetuity, the fishing rules for residents into Hawaii State law. NPS is participating with the local community and a multidisciplinary technical committee of partner organizations, government agencies, and nongovernmental organizations to produce fishing regulations and a monitoring plan for 2004.

FWS provided technical and financial assistance to the Maui Coastal Land Trust, Ducks Unlimited, and the Hawaii Division of Forestry and Wildlife to help obtain $2 million in federal assistance to purchase and protect a unique, 277-acre coastal ecosystem encompassing a wetland, riparian habitats, 1.2 miles of marine shoreline (including 8,000 feet fronting one of the most extensive coral reef systems on Maui), and one of the last intact sand dune complexes in the state. The funds, provided to the State of Hawaii through the FWS's National Coastal Wetland Grant Program and Section 6 Recovery Land Acquisition Grant Program, were awarded to the Maui Coastal Land Trust to purchase, hold, and manage the property in perpetuity. Subsequently, the FWS's Private Stewardship Grant Program awarded $107,080 to the Maui Coastal Land Trust to initiate habitat restoration activities that will benefit not only the nearby coral reef system, but migratory bird species, sea turtle nests, rare coastal plants, and important archeological resources in the surrounding dunes as well.

Biscayne National Park near Miami has created a coral nursery for future restoration projects. Multiple impacts from vessel groundings, storms, coral diseases and other stressors are requiring scientists and resource managers to develop innovative strategies to restore coral reefs. The coral nursery is a pioneering effort to rebuild damaged coral reefs by using new coral recruits grown in the nursery. Park scientists and volunteers populate the nursery by rescuing coral fragments from grounding sites that would die if not properly tended. They are first taken to the NOAA Fisheries Southeast Fisheries Science Center facility at Virginia Key to be stabilized, and later transferred to nursery sites in the Park. The University of North Carolina, students from the University of Miami, and volunteers assist in research and nursery maintenance.

The Submersible Habitat for Analyzing Reef Quality (SHARQ), developed and patented by USGS scientists, documents reef health. SHARQ helps quantify changes in water chemistry resulting from

metabolism in the coral reef community. Researchers can change the environmental conditions of the submersible habitat to observe the response of the reef communities. Data from *in situ* experiments, combined with remotely sensed map data, are enabling scientists to model the effects of global climate change, turbidity, nutrients, temperature, and grazing on coral reefs.

A brief summary of the work of our individual bureaus follows.

Department of the Interior Coral Reef Programs

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The Fish and Wildlife Service manages 13 National Wildlife Refuges that include significant coral reefs. FWS also protects and restores reefs and other species and habitats, enforces laws, and works with other countries to foster reef conservation worldwide. Virtually all of these approaches are founded upon partnerships--collaborative efforts with other federal agencies, state, local, and territorial governments, and concerned private groups. In combination, these dedicated partners can help reduce the threats to coral reefs and conserve these vital parts of our global heritage.

· *National Wildlife Refuges:* FWS manages 10 National Wildlife Refuges (NWR) in the Pacific, which include approximately 2,164,000 acres of coral reefs and adjacent ocean habitat, and 3 coral refuges in South Florida and the Caribbean totaling about 756,000 acres. To ensure that long-term conservation goals are achieved, the FWS is developing and implementing Comprehensive Conservation Management Plans for all of its refuges with coral reefs. Refuges are also developing and employing innovative tools for managing coral reefs, including marine zoning, habitat restoration, education and outreach, law enforcement, research and monitoring, and improving the public's enjoyment of the refuges.

· *Coral Reef Conservation, Restoration, and Protection:* One FWS goal is to ensure that human activities do not adversely affect coral reefs or species, such as endangered sea turtles, that rely on healthy reefs. FWS programs for endangered species protection, coastal habitat restoration, fisheries management, and review of federal actions, as well as direct assistance to states and Territories, all help to conserve coral reefs. The FWS is also statutorily designated to comment on Clean Water Act section 404 permits and other water-related development activities under federal authorization or permit. FWS biologists regularly coordinate with federal, state, Territorial, and private groups to ensure that during project development, coral reef fish and wildlife are considered equally with other project-related features and adverse impacts to coral reef ecosystems from coastal and nearshore marine projects are avoided or reduced. When accidents harm reefs, FWS works with partners to assess the damage and expedite reef recovery.

Other coral conservation efforts are more proactive: for example, the coastal partnership program implements projects that protect coastal habitats before they are degraded. Examples of conservation efforts include conducting surveys of coral reefs near proposed development projects to assess potential impacts, developing recommendations to preserve the integrity of reefs, and deploying navigational aids in areas to prevent boat groundings and anchor damage.

· *Enforcing International Trade Laws:* The United States is the primary market for imported coral, which is used in jewelry and the aquarium trade. Many species of coral are listed in Appendix II of

CITES, which allows enforcement agencies to monitor and regulate commercial imports. FWS enforces international fish and wildlife-related trade laws by inspecting coral imports, intercepting illegal shipments, and collecting and maintaining U.S. trade data for coral reef species. FWS developed, in partnership with NOAA, the *Guide to Indian and Pacific Corals Common in the Wildlife Trade*, a reference to assist inspectors and enforcement officers, to assist international efforts to control the trade of corals. FWS is working with partners to combat the use of sodium cyanide poisoning, a method for collecting live reef fish for food and the aquarium industry that causes widespread destruction of the living reef.

· *International Conservation of Coral Reefs:* FWS is fostering the conservation of reefs in other countries through training and education programs, as well as projects that promote the conservation of species and habitats within a watershed framework. Among the important habitats linked to coral reefs and targeted for conservation are seagrass beds and mangrove forests. The Western Hemisphere Program sponsors protected area manager training through two international programs, Mexico/RESERVA and Brazil/AMUC. The program also awards small grants to promote the involvement of local communities and organizations in coral reef conservation activities.

National Park Service

The National Park Service manages ten park units with coral reef habitats of almost 275,000 acres (270,000 acres in the South Atlantic/Caribbean and 5,000 in the Pacific). Among these is Dry Tortugas National Park in South Florida, established in 1908 as the world's first marine protected area. On July 1, 2001, it became part of the largest fully protected underwater ecological reserve in North America with the creation of the Tortugas Ecological Reserve. Biscayne National Park, established in 1968 to protect and preserve a nationally significant marine ecosystem, is the largest NPS coral reef unit, with about 172,500 acres of coral reefs, mangrove shorelines, and coastal estuaries. The nearshore reefs at War in the Pacific NHP, Guam, are home to an estimated 3,500 to 4,000 species and are among the most diverse ecosystems within the National Park System. NPS works internationally to share expertise and knowledge with others and to improve the level of protection afforded coral reef parks in the United States and elsewhere.

U.S. Geological Survey

The U.S. Geological Survey is the Nation’s principal natural science and information agency conducting research, monitoring and assessments to improve our understanding of the natural world. With research centers and field stations in Florida, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Hawaii and elsewhere across the Nation, USGS is providing resource managers with information critical to understanding the ecology, health, and management of coral reefs. USGS coral reef research focuses on understanding the structure and function of reef communities. High resolution thematic mapping and characterization are utilized to address reef health and change, geologic growth and development, the effects of sediment transport on reefs, and the interactions of groundwater and reef health. In addition, USGS scientists are investigating the relationships between water quality and coral health and disease; the effects of fishing and no take zones on coral reef resources; and developing new monitoring techniques.

Office of Insular Affairs

The Department of the Interior has administrative responsibility for coordinating federal policy in the territories of American Samoa, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and oversight of federal programs and funds in the freely associated states of the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau. The Office of Insular Affairs (OIA) works to develop more efficient and effective government in the insular areas by recommending policies, providing financial and technical assistance, and strengthening federal-insular relationships.

OIA, in cooperation with NOAA, annually provides technical and financial assistance to the insular areas to improve the management and protection of their marine resources. Grants support a broad range of projects designed to fill gaps in management capacity and to develop a comprehensive resource management program within each of the jurisdictions.

Working with the Freely Associated States: The U.S.-affiliated islands total fewer that 2,000 square miles of land in aggregate but are distributed over more than 3,000,000 square miles of ocean - an area equivalent to the conterminous United States. These waters are home to some of the most extensive and biologically diverse coral reef ecosystems in the world. Islanders have depended on these resources for a wide range of utilitarian, symbolic, and ornamental functions since prehistoric times. OIA works with the freely associated states to improve the management and use of their marine resources.

Minerals Management Service

As steward of our federal offshore lands known as the Outer Continental Shelf, the Minerals Management Service is responsible for balancing the Nation's search for petroleum energy and marine minerals with the protection of the human, marine, and coastal environments. The MMS environmental programs serve this important mission by providing the information necessary for informed decisions on energy and non-energy mineral planning and development activities for the Outer Continental Shelf.

Since the early 1970s, MMS has supported a comprehensive program of mapping and multidisciplinary study of the East and West Flower Garden Banks, located in a petroleum-rich area in the Gulf of Mexico. The Flower Garden Banks are a pair of topographic features, topped by an array of reef-building corals and associated organisms. MMS is currently supporting a long-term monitoring effort, co-sponsored by the National Marine Sanctuary Program, to assess the health of the coral reefs and evaluate changes in the coral community. MMS will use this information to evaluate the adequacy and effectiveness of current lease stipulations in protecting the important biological resources of the Flower Garden Banks. To date, scientific assessments show that the corals of the East and West Flower Garden Banks are healthy and growing.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my formal statement, and I will be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.