VESSEL GROUNDING

The Florida Reef Tract is susceptible to a range of threats, including direct injuries caused by vessels grounding on the coral reefs (Figure 1). Vessel hulls, anchors, propellers and cables can fracture and crush coral reef framework and dislodge corals, sponges and other marine animals and plants.

Figure 1. The sailboat ran aground in 2008 offshore West Palm Beach, FL Photo: Erin McDevitt, FWC

Causes of Vessel Grounding

This may occur due to poor navigation and planning, engine failure, bad weather and rough seas or a lack of knowledge about the marine environment or water depth. The grounding of a large commercial ship can cause massive damage to coral reef organisms and benthic hardbottom, and the grounding of even a small recreational boat on a reef can dislodge and break coral colonies[i]. After initial grounding damage has been done, more injury to the reef may occur through secondary impacts during the process of removing the grounded vessel from the hardbottom habitat. SEAFAN seeks reports of observed vessel groundings by concerned citizens.

Monitoring

In Florida, the Reef Injury Prevention and Response Program (RIPR) of the Department of Environmental Protection Coral Reef Conservation Program (DEP CRCP) coordinates the response and assessment of coral reef and hardbottom injuries resulting from direct vessel impacts such as grounding, anchoring and cable drag events (Figure 2). RIPR develops and implements ways to prevent coral reef damage from vessel grounding events[ii]. When damages to reef resources do occur,

Figure 2. Stony coral damaged by a vessel grounding in Broward County. Photo: DEP Coral Reef Conservation Program

FAST FACTS

Avoid damage to coral from vessel groundings:

- Always plan your navigational route in advance through deep, well-marked waterways, and keep in mind that tidal changes may affect the navigability of an area.
- Consult nautical charts to avoid areas too shallow for your vessel and periodically check to ensure that navigational equipment is up to date.
- Know your vessel's draft and always maintain a sharp lookout for shallow waters, often distinguishable by dark colors or even breaking waves.
- View the locations of Southeast Florida's reefs on your mobile device, by downloading the free app selecting the "Southeast Florida Coral Reef Locator" map.

RIPR ensures appropriate and adequate restoration is carried out on injured coral reefs and that those responsible for damages are held accountable, per the Florida Coral Reef Protection Act (Florida Statute 403.93345).

In the event of injury to coral habitats from a vessel grounding, the Florida Coral Reef Protection Act requires the following from the responsible party (owner, operator, manager or insurer of the vessel):

- Notify the U.S. Coast Guard and then notify DEP within 24 hours of damaging or otherwise impacting a coral reef. Call 866-770-7335 or the emergency grounding hotline at 786-385-3054.
- Remove the grounded vessel within 72 hours after the initial incident if it is safe to do so and if the U.S. Coast Guard approves. Discuss removal plans with DEP and make sure removal does not further damage coral reefs.
- Cooperate with DEP to assess damage and restoration of the injured coral reef. By making every effort to Safely navigate vessels around coral reefs, vessel groundings and the resulting coral reef damage can be easily avoided.

Report Marine Debris to Southeast Florida Action Network (SEAFAN) online or call 866-770-7335

SEAFAN is a reporting and response system designed to improve the protection and management of Southeast Florida's coral reefs by enhancing marine debris clean-up efforts, increasing response to vessel groundings and anchor damage, and providing early detection of potentially harmful biological disturbances.