

Coast Guard may change rules to protect Fort Lauderdale reefs from freighters

By Robert Nolin
South Florida Sun-Sentinel
Posted October 9 2006

Fort Lauderdale has a parking problem -- about two miles offshore.

Ocean-going vessels waiting to enter Port Everglades drop anchor in two areas nestled among three reefs that parallel the coastline. But this year, two large ships missed their mark and ran aground on the reefs, crunching delicate coral and sea fans.

In response, the U.S. Coast Guard last week unveiled a draft emergency proposal: Limit the size of the vessels allowed among the reefs and restrict them to certain areas.

"We've been working toward a resolution," said Lt. James Suffern, the Coast Guard's chief of waterway management for the region. "It is an emergency for everyone to get something done here."



Clipper Lasco aground on a reef off Fort Lauderdale.

The two ships that grounded this year, one in May and another last month, bring to 11 the number that have run up on reefs since 1994. They damaged more than three acres of sensitive reef and cost ship owners millions to repair.

"It's been bad for several years," said Ken Banks, marine resource specialist with the Broward County Environmental Protection Department.

Suffern's proposal, subject to change, is to limit to 575 feet the length of the vessels permitted to anchor between the second and third offshore reefs. That area, called Anchorage A, is a 1,000-foot wide, mile-and-a-half-long rectangle that runs north and south between the reefs.

The proposal would restrict vessels to four specific anchor points along its middle, one boat for each.

The second area, Anchorage B, extends from the outermost reef about a mile and a half to the east and three-quarters of a mile north and south.

The new plan would allow three specific anchor points there, for a total of seven anchored vessels at a time.

Others could drop hooks in deep water to the east.

"The anchorage that we're going to come up with is going to be able to accommodate everyone," Suffern said.

"It provides enough space in between vessels and provides as many spots as we could. The [anchor] points were designed so vessels would not be interfering with the reefs."

Richard Dodge, director of the National Coral Reef Institute at Nova Southeastern University in Davie, said by enacting an emergency measure, the Coast Guard, the sole authority over the anchorage, can bring a quick change without a lengthy environmental approval process.

But Dodge said further study is needed.

"The perception is if you limit both the number of ships and the size of the ships, you would make it less likely you would get congestion in there and less likely you would run aground," he said. "Whether that would do the trick or not, nobody knows."

Dodge is on a committee made up of Port Everglades officials and environment experts on county, state and federal levels that next week will review the Coast Guard's proposal.

"It needs some modification," said Banks, another committee member. "I think it will help; I can't say it will stop the problem."

Other options could be to set out large mooring balls to which ships may tether, restrict the area to vessels with shallower drafts, or ban them from the anchorages when winds become too strong.

Officials said any adjustments to the anchorage must balance environmental and economic concerns.

If steps aren't taken, reefs that took centuries to develop could be damaged in minutes.

If measures are too restrictive, vessels might bypass the port, causing business to fall. They could also be forced to steam in circles, burning fuel and harming the environment as well.

But the current situation can't continue.

"There should be some kind of change," Dodge said.

Port director Phillip Allen endorses a change -- as long as incoming vessels still have a place to pause.

"We would be supportive of any effort that minimizes environmental impact," he said.

"As long as there is an anchorage available, I don't see how it would impact the port's commerce."

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