

South Florida coral nurseries get federal stimulus



A diver glues cuttings of coral to cement blocks in a nursery in the Keys. The nurseries are at varying sites to determine which coral strains thrive under certain conditions. (Ken Nedimyer, Worldwide Office Photo Archive / June 30, 2009)

FORT LAUDERDALE - The ailing coral reefs of South Florida have received a rare piece of good news: The Obama administration has announced a series of economic stimulus grants that includes \$3.3 million for offshore nurseries to help young corals grow.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration on Tuesday awarded the money to The Nature Conservancy to expand offshore coral nurseries in Broward County, Biscayne National Park and the Keys, as well as to create new nurseries in the Keys and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The nurseries will be used to grow elkhorn and staghorn corals, once abundant corals that now are on the endangered species list.

James Byrne, The Nature Conservancy's marine science program manager for Florida and the Caribbean, said divers will nurture the young corals by scraping off algae and protecting them from predators. Once they're grown, they transfer them to nearby natural reefs. Over the next three years, the nurseries will grow roughly 12,000 new corals.

"The great thing about it is we're dealing with species of coral that are threatened, and by really putting resources and effort into it, we can put a significant number of corals out there," he said. "These are among the main species of coral that provide habitat for fish."

The coral money will fund all or part of 57 jobs, mostly technical and scientific, according to The Nature Conservancy, which will be working with eight partner organizations. David Gilliam, assistant professor at Nova Southeastern University's Oceanographic Center, which is among the partners, said the Broward nursery is off Hugh Taylor Birch State Park and that a new location may be chosen for the expanded one.

Tom Moore, habitat restoration specialist with the National Marine Fisheries Service, said the nurseries will help increase the ability of these corals to reproduce sexually, enhancing their genetic diversity.

The money is part of \$167 million in grants announced Tuesday to restore coastal ecosystems around the country.

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"NOAA is investing in green jobs for Americans to restore habitat for valuable fish and wildlife and strengthen coastal communities, making them more resilient to storms, sea-level rise and other effects of climate change," NOAA administrator Jane Lubchenco said in a statement.

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