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For Immediate Release

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Puerto Rico's DNER and NOAA to Initiate Emergency Restoration of Coral Reef Damaged by Grounding of Oil Tanker

Dive team to attempt to save coral damaged by Margara grounding

May 15, 2006 (*San Juan, PR*) – The Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER) for the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico today announced that the department has entered into a joint effort with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to conduct immediate emergency restoration measures to save and restore coral reefs located off Guayanilla Bay, Puerto Rico, that were damaged by the *T/V Margara* oil tanker grounding last month.

T/V Margara, a 748-foot Cayman Island flagged vessel, loaded with over 300,000 barrels of fuel oil, while en route from Cartagena, Colombia to Tallaboa, Puerto Rico ran aground on April 27, 2006, approximately two miles off the region of Guayanilla, on the southwestern coast of Puerto Rico. Ongoing investigations continue as to why the ship was traveling so far out of the designated shipping lanes. While the ship was re-floated approximately twenty-three hours later, the grounding did result in a loss of substantial and diverse coral reef habitat.

“We have conducted some preliminary damage assessment of the site, and have found that there is significant coral reef damage,” said Craig Lilyestrom, Director of Marine Resources Division, DNER. “With the assistance of NOAA’s Restoration Center and cooperation, funding and technical support from the ship’s insurance underwriters, it appears that we can take immediate steps over the next few days and weeks to stabilize and hopefully save much of the damaged coral.”

Coral reefs are an important natural resource for fostering fish habitat, ensuring marine biodiversity, and for recreational use. Certain coral species are considered endangered or

threatened by both human and climatological impacts. Last week, both Elkhorn coral (*Acropora palmata*) and Staghorn coral (*Acropora cervicornis*) were listed as threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

“We did confirm that Staghorn coral were impacted by the Magara grounding,” said Mr. Lilyestrom. “Other soft and hard corals were also seen damaged or disturbed, and it is our hope that over the next few days we can take some quick action to give many of these injured corals a second chance.”

Because the grounding occurred in state waters, The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico has directed DNER to assume the lead administrative Trustee (LAT) role in the natural resource damage assessment for this grounding incident. NOAA has agreed to participate as co-trustee.

“We are grateful to have NOAA divers on scene to help coordinate this important triage effort. We are also grateful to have established a good, cooperative relationship with the ship’s underwriters,” said Hon. Javier Velez Arocho, Secretary of DNER. “The Responsible Party clearly respects the task at hand and is aiding us with funding and resources to facilitate this quick and vital phase of restoration.”

About DNER-Puerto Rico

The Department of Natural and Environmental Resources of Puerto Rico (DNER) is responsible for the management of 25 areas with marine components including Natural Reserves, a Commonwealth Forest and a Marine Reserve. The Natural and Marine Reserves are managed by the Natural Reserves and Commonwealth Forests Divisions of the Bureau of Reserves, Refuges, and Coastal Resources of DNER. Through the passage of Puerto Rican Law 147 (Coral Reef Conservation Act of 1999), the Commonwealth has elevated the concern for and protection of coral reefs as a natural and protected resource, vital to sustaining fish and biodiversity within state waters.

About NOAA

NOAA, an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation’s coastal and marine resources. NOAA’s Southeastern Damage Assessment and Restoration Centers, based in St. Petersburg, Florida, have been activated to assist in natural resource damage assessment and reef restoration projects throughout the region. In recent years, NOAA has assisted Puerto Rico in the basic assessment of coral reef resources, as called for in the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force Action Plan and the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000. Other projects include: conducting habitat mapping of the western shelf of Puerto Rico, assessing the status of reef resources, and assessing fishery impacts.

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