

For Immediate Release, January 23, 2017

Contact: Rachel Silverstein, (619) 787-3161, rachel@miamiwaterkeeper.org
Brettny Hardy, (415) 217-2142, bhardy@earthjustice.org
Jaclyn Lopez, (727) 490-9190, jlopez@biologicaldiversity.org
Manley Fuller, (850) 656-7113, wildfed@gmail.com
Tom Ingram, (858) 616-6408, tingram@dema.org

***Corps Commits to Conduct New Environmental Studies
Before Port Everglades Expansion Dredging Begins***

Dredging delayed until 2019

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla.— The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will go back to square one and conduct new environmental studies before starting its planned dredging project to expand Port Everglades. The Corps' dredging project at Port Everglades aims to make way for larger, "post-Panamax" shipping vessels.

While the Corps conducts new studies, plaintiffs, including environmental organizations and America's largest trade organization for recreational divers, have agreed to put a temporary hold on their federal Endangered Species Act and National Environmental Policy Act lawsuit over the planned dredging. The Corps' dredging plan failed to account for damage to nearby, fragile coral reefs.

The Corps has agreed to reassess its Port Everglades environmental analysis because of new environmental information available about the widespread and unanticipated damage incurred during a similar dredging project at nearby PortMiami and new, local coral species recently added to the federal Endangered Species Act list.

In Miami, the dredging proved disastrous for the coral reefs in the area. For the PortMiami project, the Corps had assumed there would be minimal impacts to coral, but instead fine-grained sediment from the project harmed tens of thousands of coral colonies and over 250 acres of reef designated as "critical habitat" for the ESA-listed staghorn corals. The National Marine Fisheries Service assessed the area and determined that 95% of the surveyed reef is no longer suitable habitat for corals, and some of the damaged reef will never recover naturally.

"The devastating coral damage discovered after the PortMiami dredging gives us all pause. It is a good reason for the Corps to go back to the drawing board and learn from its mistakes in Miami," said Brettny Hardy, an attorney at Earthjustice, lawyers for plaintiffs in the case. "Under the law, a proper analysis must be done before further taxpayer dollars are spent on this potentially devastating project."

The Port Everglades dredging, which was planned to begin in 2017, is now expected to be on hold until at least 2019 while the new environmental analyses are conducted.

“The Corps’ and NMFS’ prior environmental analyses simply ignored evidence from PortMiami that showed estimated impacts from dredging near corals are significantly more harmful and widespread than expected.” said Rachel Silverstein, executive director and waterkeeper of Miami Waterkeeper. “The current environmental statements do not reflect ‘best available science’, which is the legal standard for agency decision-making, and therefore, they must be redone.”

“Coral and coastal Floridians will benefit from the Corps pumping the brakes on this massive project,” said Jaclyn Lopez, Florida director at the Center for Biological Diversity. “We have to learn from our mistakes and do what’s right for our irreplaceable coastal resources.”

“We will remain vigilant as this process moves forward to ensure full compliance with the law and protection of our irreplaceable coral reefs,” said Manley Fuller, president of the Florida Wildlife Federation.

Each year, snorkeling and scuba diving in Florida account for almost 9 million visitor-days, create almost 30,000 full-time equivalent tourism-related jobs, and contribute hundreds of millions of dollars directly to the Florida economy.

“The reefs provide huge environmental and economic benefits to South Florida. This is a positive step for the entire recreational diving community, especially in Fort Lauderdale, which depends upon a healthy reef environment” said Tom Ingram, President and CEO of the Diving Equipment and Marketing Association (DEMA). “DEMA is determined to help protect the natural reef from destruction so that many generations to come can continue to enjoy the opportunity to see, first-hand, this unique and precious natural resource.”

Earthjustice is representing Miami Waterkeeper, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Florida Wildlife Federation, and the Diving Equipment and Manufacturing Association (DEMA). Jim Porter of James M. Porter, P.A. is also representing Miami Waterkeeper. Bob Harris of Messer Caparelo, P.A. is also representing DEMA in the lawsuit.

The Corps will hold two public meetings to explore the scope of the project. The meetings are at 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. on Feb. 22 at Broward County Convention Center, 1950 Eisenhower Blvd, Fort Lauderdale, 33316. Public presentations are scheduled for 2:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m., with a Q&A period to follow. Anyone with questions about the meetings should contact Terri Jordan-Sellers at (904) 232-1817 or at Terri.Jordan-Sellers@usace.army.mil.

Miami Waterkeeper is a South Florida-based non-profit. Our mission is to protect South Florida’s watershed through citizen engagement and community action, ensuring swimmable, drinkable, fishable, water for all. Through our work, we hope to ensure clean and vibrant South Florida waters and coastal culture for generations to come.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.1 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

Florida Wildlife Federation is a statewide non-profit conservation organization advocating for abundant wildlife and fisheries, habitats and clean water, and supporting outdoor recreation.

DEMA is the trade association for the recreational diving industry. Our mission is to bring businesses together to grow the recreational diving industry worldwide, and our goals include helping divers everywhere have continuing access to a clean, healthy diving environment.

Earthjustice is the premier nonprofit environmental law organization. We wield the power of the law and the strength of partnership to protect people's health; to preserve magnificent places and wildlife; to advance clean energy; and to combat climate change. We are here because the earth needs a good lawyer.