

Wednesday, April 22, 2009

**Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Statement on H.R. 860, the Coral Reef Conservation Act
Reauthorization and Enhancement Amendments of 2009
Committee on Natural Resources- Markup**

Thank you, Chairman Rahall. I want to express my strong support for H.R. 860 and to thank Ms. Bordallo for its introduction. This legislation represents another important step in our ongoing efforts to protect and conserve our nation's coral reefs. A similar bill was approved by the House during the 110th Congress, but was not passed by the Senate. I urge my colleagues on this Committee to support H.R. 860. Puerto Rico has over 5,000 square kilometers of shallow-water coral reef. Coral reefs are not only beautiful to look at, but their importance transcends the purely aesthetic. Coral reefs provide shelter and protection for many species of fish, which are the subject of a vast array of scientific inquiry and the food source for millions of people each year.

Additionally, coral reefs help protect human life and infrastructure in coastal areas from strong currents and large waves, a vital function on an exposed island territory like Puerto Rico. These are just two of the many practical benefits that coral reefs provide, in addition to the countless less-tangible pleasures they offer to swimmers, scuba divers, and anyone fascinated by the natural world.

Mr. Chairman: I am pleased that this bill, by increasing the authorized funding levels for various coral reef-related programs, seems likely to result in additional funding for the coral reef research institutes, including the Caribbean Coral Reef Institute located in 2 Puerto Rico.

The Caribbean Coral Reef Institute, like its sister institutes, sponsors scientific research and monitoring programs designed to understand the threats to our coral reef ecosystem and to help manage those threats. Over the past five years alone, more than 50% of Puerto Rico's live coral cover has been lost due to a combination of local and global stressors. Thus, the Institute's mission—and, by extension, its need for federal funding—is more critical than ever.

During my tenure as Puerto Rico's Attorney General I learned first-hand about the importance of protecting coral reefs and the vital role

they play in our ecosystem. On January 7, 1994, the tank barge *Morris J. Berman* became stranded on a reef a few hundred yards off-shore of San Juan, spilling 798,000 gallons of fuel oil onto the beach and surrounding waters. The Commonwealth filed suit against the owners of the vessel, which ultimately resulted in a multi-million dollar award to help protect its marine patrimony. I note with approval that H.R. 860 contains a number of provisions that will improve our capacity to quickly mitigate damage that results when accidents like this one occur.

So, Mr. Chairman: I want to thank Ms. Bordallo again for taking the lead on this important piece of legislation and I look forward to working with her to secure its passage in both chambers this session.

Thank you.