



For Immediate Release
September 9, 2005

Contacts: Bianca DeLille, Oceana
202.467.1917 (o) 202-904-9046 (m)
Hannah Gillelan, MCBI
202.546.5346 (o) 240.472.1956 (m)

CONGRESS SHOWS BIPARTISAN SUPPORT FOR DEEP SEA CORALS PROTECTION BILL Oceana, MCBI Commend Members of Congress On Proposed Legislation to Set National Standards

WASHINGTON - Virgin thousand-year-old deep sea corals and sponges may be protected from being plowed under by commercial fishing practices from a bill introduced in the U.S. Senate. Remarkable for its bipartisan support, the Bottom Trawl and Deep Sea Coral Habitat Act (S. 1635), was introduced yesterday by Sen. Mel Martinez (R-FL) and Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg (D-NJ). The same bill is expected to be introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives soon.

"This legislation represents a paradigm shift in ocean management," said David Allison, director of Oceana's Stop Destructive Trawling campaign. "It will permanently stop the expansion of bottom trawling and dredging in the ancient underwater forests and gardens of coral and sponges. The bill will set national standards to protect deep sea coral habitat, freeze the footprint of bottom trawling, and put the burden of proof not to harm sensitive ocean habitat on the fishing industry."

The Bottom Trawl and Deep Sea Coral Habitat Act establishes U.S. policy that will protect deep sea corals and sponges and their habitats from damage by bottom trawl and dredge commercial fishing gear. The Act has little to no economic impact on fishermen because the areas currently fished by bottom trawlers will remain open to fishing, and a standardized process will be used to open new areas that do not contain deep sea coral and sponge ecosystems.

"This bill recognizes that deep sea coral and sponge ecosystems are every bit as important to ocean health as their warm-water cousin, the tropical coral reefs that most people are familiar with," said Dr. Elliott Norse, President of Marine Conservation Biology Institute (MCBI).

"I am pleased to introduce the Bottom Trawl and Deep Sea Coral Habitat Act today with my colleague Senator Martinez," said Senator Lautenberg. "We have only recently learned that corals and sponges form reefs in the cold, dark waters of the deep sea. Let's protect them before we lose them entirely; before we learn the extent of their importance to us and to the ecology of the deep sea."

"This bill is a common-sense approach to protecting truly important ecological treasures," said Senator Martinez. "My goal is not to harm the fishing industry; my goal is to provide a responsible protection that will conserve critical habitat that coexists with responsible fishing practices."

Deep sea corals and sponges, long-lived and slow-growing species, are being decimated by destructive bottom trawling and dredging fishing gear. In Alaskan waters alone, the National Marine Fisheries Service estimates more than one million pounds of corals and sponges are removed from the seafloor every year by commercial fishing, roughly 90 percent of it by bottom trawlers. A single pass of a bottom trawl can crush ancient coral forests into rubble, destroying areas that provide fish and other marine life with protection from predators, plentiful food, and hatcheries and nurseries.

-more-

Deep Sea Coral Protection Act Introduction

Page Two

Although crucial to ocean health, deep sea corals and sponges are minimally protected by current laws. Only in the Western Pacific, the North Pacific and the Pacific have fishing management councils taken steps to ban bottom trawling in any comprehensive way, and in New England and Mid-Atlantic deep sea corals are protected in several canyons and throughout the monkfish fishery. The recent decision by the U.S. Commerce Department to develop a "national strategy" to protect deep sea corals follows a national trend to stop the expansion of bottom trawling. However, the strategy could take years to develop, absent direction from Congress.

"We are running out of time to protect invaluable deep sea corals and sponges and their habitat," said Allison, "because they are being destroyed by bottom trawls and dredges fishing gear, which pulverize all life on the ocean floor."

"The Senators who introduce this bill today have rightly determined that the oceans should not be denuded by the actions of a few. Fishing can only continue in the long-term if we use foresight in the methods and locations we allow fishing to take place. The Bottom Trawl and Deep Sea Coral Habitat Act of 2005 will ensure that the habitats fish depend on still exist for future generations by taking a common-sense approach similar to that already used and approved of on the West Coast and in Alaska," said Dr. Norse.

#