Restored Reef Chosen as the Site for Underwater Geodetic Marker

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During the summer of 2004, scuba divers from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration placed the nation's first underwater geodetic marker at a coral reef in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

The marker was installed at Molasses Reef off Key Largo, where NOAA and partners are conducting a successful recovery effort following a major ship grounding that destroyed more than 5,000 meters of living corals in 1984. Together with a highly visible surface buoy, the geodetic marker will serve as a navigational aid to boaters and divers. The marker will also allow researchers to precisely monitor the recovery of the reef over time.

"The coral reefs of the Florida Keys are among America's finest treasures and an abundant source of awe and joy to those who encounter them," said James Connaughton, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality. "The placement of a geodetic marker in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary is both an important tool and symbol of our commitment to better understand, restore and manage our thriving coral reef ecosystems."

The *Wellwood*, a 122-meter freighter registered in Cyprus, ran aground in approximately 18 feet of water on Molasses Reef and remained there for 12 days. The grounding destroyed 5,085 square meters of living coral and injured 644 meters of reef framework, caused widespread destruction of bottom-dwelling organisms and displaced fish and other mobile marine life. Additional injury to the reef occurred as a result of Hurricanes *Elena* and *Kate* in 1985 and the active 1998 storm season.

A spar buoy with the latitude and longitude marks the location of the geodetic marker placed on the seafloor. Boaters can use this marker to calibrate the accuracy of on-board navigational systems.

"This is a wonderful step that NOAA has taken to protect our precious coral reef from boaters and divers," said U.S. Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.). "We must do everything possible to assure that this reef is protected for future generations. The reef is such an important part of our ecosystem that everything that can be done to protect it, must be done."

Drawing on experience gained from restoring other grounding sites in the region, NOAA, working with the State of Florida and the U.S. Coast Guard, developed and executed a plan for restoring the Wellwood site. The Molasses Reef restoration effort involved experts from NOAA's Damage Assessment and Restoration Program, National Marine Sanctuary Program, National Marine Fisheries Service, National Geodetic Survey and the Office of General Counsel. A number of volunteers aided the restoration effort.

"The NOAA geodetic marker at Molasses Reef will serve as a constant reminder of the fragility of our coral reefs while offering boaters and divers a practical tool for staying safe both above and below the waves," said Tim Keeney, deputy assistant secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere.

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary receives reports of about 600 vessel groundings each year, most of them small boats. The proper use of navigational aids, such as global positioning systems, can help boaters avoid running aground. The geodetic marker and surface buoy will provide a calibration site for boaters to check the accuracy of on-board navigational systems. The marker is located at 25˚ 10' 38" N and 80˚ 22' 22"W.

"We are grateful to the dedicated team of professionals and volunteers who have worked so tirelessly to restore Molasses Reef to health after such a devastating incident," said Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Superintendent Billy D. Causey. "We hope divers and snorkelers use the marker and buoy to locate and explore the restoration site while following the 'look, but don't touch' guideline to allow the reef to continue its recovery."

To learn more about NOAA, please visit: http://**www.noaa.gov.** To learn more about the *Wellwood* restoration, please visit: http://**www.restorereef.nos.noaa.gov**