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For Immediate Release

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Puerto Rico's DNER Cites Progress in Restoration of Coral Reef Damaged by Grounding of Oil Tanker

*Cooperative effort underway to save and restore
coral damaged by T/V Margara grounding incident*

July 24, 2006 (*San Juan, PR*) – The Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER) for the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico today announced that significant progress has been made in the cooperative efforts among various agencies and the party responsible for the Tanker Vessel *Margara* grounding to stabilize and restore corals damaged by the T/V *Magara* oil tanker grounding last April.

In early May, DNER entered into a cooperative effort with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and Independent Maritime Consulting, Ltd (IMC), representatives of the responsible party, 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. *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. 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 are pleased to report that due in large part to excellent and unprecedented cooperation between the trustees and the responsible party, we have seen significant progress in stabilizing injured corals,” said Craig Lilyestrom, Director of Marine Resources Division, DNER. “We are underway with a significant effort to quantify and restore corals within the impacted area. We are confident that we will be able to achieve restoration of many of the important species that were damaged.”

With the assistance of NOAA, DNER is monitoring the responsible party's restoration efforts and has built a team of resource experts to assist in this project, including technical assistance and field support from Lighthouse Technical Consulting Incorporated.

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. Both Elkhorn coral (*Acropora palmata*) and Staghorn coral (*Acropora cervicornis*) were recently listed as threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

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.

At this time, emergency restoration efforts are multi-faceted, but focus on removing ship bottom paint from the seafloor, coral reattachment, and coral rubble stabilization.

“We are grateful for the support we have received from the responsible party and NOAA, as well as the coordinated effort to date that has brought the best in expert assistance to bear on this important emergency restoration effort,” said Hon. Javier Velez Arocho, Secretary of DNER.

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.