



## Florida's Reefs in Peril, Again: Looming Port Everglades Dredge Threatens Corals

Dredging project could cause the nation's largest permitted coral destruction ever, repeating PortMiami's costly environmental disaster, still unfixed from a decade ago.

Miami Waterkeeper – together with Earthjustice, Center for Biological Diversity, Florida Wildlife Federation, and the Diving Equipment and Marketing Association – sent a letter to Congressional decision-makers and launched a campaign to stop plans to dredge Port Everglades until stronger environmental safeguards are in place. If plans for the massive expansion dredge are approved, it would be the largest destruction of coral reefs permitted in U.S. history and will likely kill the last natural staghorn corals left in Florida.

Experts warn the project could devastate one of Florida's most valuable reef ecosystems – repeating the ecological disaster that followed the PortMiami dredge just a decade ago. From 2013-2015, the Army Corps of Engineers led a massive dredging project at PortMiami that buried nearly 300 acres of reef and killed millions of corals, including Endangered Species Act-listed staghorn corals. The Corps has yet to restore the vast majority of the damage, despite commitments and public outcry. Now, with the Port Everglades dredge looming, Miami Waterkeeper says history is poised to repeat itself.

South Florida's coral reefs are a biodiversity treasure and an economic lifeline, dissipating wave energy and shielding the coast from an estimated \$665 million in storm damage each year. The reef near Port Everglades is home to some of the last, natural stands of threatened staghorn corals and one of the last known breeding populations of queen conch. Without proper safeguards, the planned dredge – expected to last over five years, more than twice as long as the PortMiami project – could unleash massive sediment plumes, smothering corals and conch.

In a letter to Congressional decision-makers, Miami Waterkeeper, Earthjustice, Center for Biological Diversity, Florida Wildlife Federation, and the Diving Equipment and Marketing Association outline the project's many deficiencies and call for a halt to project planning until the Corps:

**In a letter to Congressional decision-makers, Miami Waterkeeper outlines the project's many deficiencies and calls for a halt to project planning until the Corps:**

1. Commits to a dredging methodology and evaluates the full scope of the Project's harms on listed species and critical habitat.
2. Uses the best available science to finalize robust project plans before the construction begins.
3. Commits to specific and enforceable mitigation and minimization measures that will demonstrably and effectively protect listed corals, queen conch, and other listed species in the project area.

4. Demonstrates that a mitigation plan of the magnitude necessary to minimize impacts and to compensate for the massive coral losses the project would cause is feasible, scientifically supported, and would be successful, which includes securing necessary funding and personnel to carry out mitigation prior to project approval.
5. Performs an updated cost-benefit analysis, as project costs have ballooned and the prior study was done before PortMiami was deep-dredged.
6. Applies the lessons learned from the PortMiami dredging disaster and does not allow what happened in Miami to happen in Fort Lauderdale.
7. Mitigates fully for the damage inflicted to Florida's Coral Reef at PortMiami - which has never been fully mitigated - before the Port Everglades dredging moves forward.

"Florida cannot afford to dredge up past mistakes," said Dr. Rachel Silverstein, CEO and Waterkeeper of Miami Waterkeeper. "The PortMiami expansion led to the destruction of hundreds of acres of reef and the death of millions of corals— and now, even 10 years later, they want to dredge anew at Port Everglades, but they still haven't fixed the past damage in Miami."

The PortMiami project became a landmark environmental case after Miami Waterkeeper exposed that the Corps and its contractors had underreported the damage by claiming only six corals were lost and submitting falsely labelled photos in court. Miami Waterkeeper's own mapping, scientific publications, and legal work proved otherwise — revealing the true loss was over a million corals, eventually confirmed by federal studies, too. Despite securing changes to dredging policies, the Corps is backtracking on promises and walked away from measures to reduce impacts, risking an even worse fate for Port Everglades given its longer construction timeline, the rarity of the coral and conch directly next to the project, and the high stakes for coastal resilience.

"This dredging project will create underwater plumes of sediment that will settle on the surrounding reef, killing corals by the millions. At risk here are some of the last intact natural stands of staghorn coral, which are considered threatened under the Endangered Species Act," said Danika Desai, Senior Associate Attorney on Earthjustice's Oceans Team. "When the U.S. Army Corps completed a similar project at PortMiami in 2014, nearly 300 acres of reef were destroyed and millions of corals died—it was an environmental catastrophe. There is still time to avoid repeating this grave mistake."

To raise awareness, Miami Waterkeeper — in partnership with [Only One](#), [Earthjustice](#), [Florida Wildlife Federation](#), and the [Diving Equipment and Marketing Association](#) — is taking the fight public with digital storytelling, grassroots organizing, and direct advocacy targeting Project decision-makers.

"The coral reefs off Fort Lauderdale are part of Florida's world-renowned marine habitats, supporting a robust eco-tourism economy and home to countless marine species. Ignoring past impacts without a plan to mitigate damage sets a dangerous precedent for conservation. We are proud to take action with our partners to protect these irreplaceable ecosystems," said Sarah Gledhill, President and CEO of Florida Wildlife Federation.

"We expect our government to protect these precious coral reefs, not destroy them with another reckless dredging project," said Elise Bennett, Florida and Caribbean director at the Center for Biological Diversity. "Florida's incredible marine diversity and our coastal communities depend on healthy reefs. These life-giving reefs are already struggling against disease and warming oceans, with imperiled species like queen conchs and staghorn corals sliding closer to extinction. Once they're gone, we'll never get them back."

“We are calling on the public to hold our elected officials accountable to protect what is left of the reef at the heart of South Florida’s culture, economy, and environment,” said Silverstein. “The time is now to protect the reef that is protecting us. We have to learn from past mistakes and hold the Corps to a higher environmental standard. These last corals are too precious to lose.”

Floridians can take action by signing the [petition](#) and writing to their [representatives](#).

## About Miami Waterkeeper

Miami Waterkeeper is a non-profit organization that develops local solutions to global challenges. Miami Waterkeeper protects South Florida’s waters by advocating for resilient solutions grounded in science, rooted in nature, and driven by community. As a leader in environmental advocacy in South Florida, Miami Waterkeeper envisions a resilient South Florida that is a global leader in clean water solutions, where thriving communities and nature coexist. For more information, please visit [www.miamiwaterkeeper.org](http://www.miamiwaterkeeper.org).

## About Earthjustice

Earthjustice is the premier nonprofit environmental law organization. We wield the power of 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.

<https://earthjustice.org/>

## About Center for Biological Diversity

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.8 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places. The Center’s Florida and Caribbean program uses science, law, and creative media to defend the region’s unique biodiversity for generations to come. <https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/>

## About Florida Wildlife Federation

The Florida Wildlife Federation is a statewide non-profit dedicated to safeguarding Florida’s water, wildlife, and wild spaces by taking action today to prevent irreversible loss tomorrow. Since 1936, we’ve united conservationists, anglers, hunters, recreationists, and wildlife enthusiasts to protect Florida’s ecosystems. From the halls of legislature to the homes of everyday Floridians, we’ve achieved milestones such as securing protections for iconic species like the Florida panther and constitutional amendments for land and water conservation. With a steadfast commitment to tackling critical challenges, we envision a future where Florida’s natural resources are fiercely protected by and for all. Learn more at [floridawildlifefederation.org](http://floridawildlifefederation.org).

## About The Diving Equipment and Marketing Association (DEMA)

The Diving Equipment and Marketing Association is an international non-profit trade association with the mission of bringing businesses together to grow the diving industry worldwide. With more than 1,400 business members, DEMA promotes recreational scuba diving through consumer awareness programs such as the Go Dive Now campaign; conducts industry research and advocates for access by divers to a clean and healthy aquatic environment. DEMA owns and produces DEMA Show, an annual trade-only event for businesses in the scuba diving, action watersports and adventure/dive-travel industries. <https://www.dema.org/>