MEMORANDUM

To: Council Members                                      AGENDA ITEM 5
From: Staff                                            Date: April 12, 2019
Subject: Southeast Florida Coral Reef Tract Update

Background

At their October 20, 2017 joint meeting, the Treasure Coast and South Florida Regional Planning Councils adopted Resolution TCSF #17-01 encouraging: 1) the establishment and management of the Southeast Florida Coral Reef Ecosystem Conservation Area (SFCRECA); 2) adequate state funding for water quality monitoring and coral disease response projects; and 3) the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) and Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) to employ additional strategies to greatly reduce nutrient loading to the nearshore reefs.

Following the 2017 resolution, the Councils’ success in securing the “SFCRECA” designation, and the provision of initial State funding, the Treasure Coast and South Florida Regional Planning Councils adopted Resolution TCSF #18-04 at their October 12, 2018 joint meeting. This resolution encouraged the Governor and Legislature to establish a long-term, recurring revenue source to provide adequate and flexible funding for responses to coral reef disease and to better address the harmful environmental conditions enabling the disease epidemic.

In his Fiscal Year 2019-2020 budget, Governor DeSantis proposed $6 million for coral reef disease and coastal resilience. While the base amount currently being reconciled between the Florida House and Senate budgets is less than this, the proposed funding is significant and the FDEP may be able to direct additional funds to coral reef disease response beyond the legislative baseline.

Analysis

The Florida Reef Tract continues to experience a significant coral disease outbreak of epidemic proportions. Originally confined north of Biscayne National Park, the disease has spread rapidly north to the St. Lucie Inlet in Martin County and south into the Keys National Marine Sanctuary in Monroe County. Experts agree that this is the worst documented coral disease outbreak on the planet.
The stakes are high. Southeast Florida reefs support a rich and diverse assemblage of habitat that serve as essential spawning, nursery, breeding, and feeding grounds for numerous species of ecologic and economic importance. This nearshore marine ecosystem is essential for supporting over 71,000 jobs and contributing over $6 billion to Florida’s economy, while annually serving approximately 6 million residents and over 38 million tourists. In addition, coral reefs are the first line of defense for our beaches and coastal communities, providing important physical impact and flood reduction protection from severe and frequent tropical storm events. Coral reefs also manufacture some of the sand that supplies our beaches. The Florida Reef Tract comprises the only living nearshore coral reef ecosystem in the continental United States.

Conclusion

The coral reef disease outbreak continues to seriously degrade and jeopardize the entire nearshore reef ecosystem within the five-county area between Martin and Monroe counties. It is persisting and spreading rapidly and requires continuing aggressive, coordinated action by the State of Florida.

Recommendation

The Council should continue to monitor and encourage a robust State response to the coral disease outbreak. In addition, Council should continue to participate in the joint working group with South Florida Regional Planning Council and arrange a meeting with senior Florida Department of Environmental Protection officials as soon as possible to coordinate Local, State, and Federal efforts.

Council Action – April 19, 2019

Council received an update from Thomas J. Lanahan and Commissioner Smith from Martin County.