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EPA Takes Unprecedented Step Toward New Water-quality Standards for Ocean Acidification

SAN FRANCISCO— In response to a petition from the Center for Biological Diversity, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is beginning an in-depth study about combating ocean acidification and reducing pollution that's having a dramatic impact on corals, shellfish and other sea life. The decision marks the first time the EPA has launched a formal workgroup to identify national water quality standards that can be used to detect the effects of ocean acidification marine life. The agency has announced that within the next six months it will convene a panel of scientists and policy makers to discuss the Center's petition.

"We're happy to see the EPA taking this first step toward protecting fisheries and coastal ecosystems before it's too late," said Miyoko Sakashita, oceans director at the Center. "Our oceans are in the midst of a dangerous transformation that, left unchecked, will make sea waters inhospitable for many, many animals. It's not too late, though, and this working group will be tasked with deciding where the tipping points are, so we can act now to prevent the worst effects."

The Center's petition, filed in April, requested that the EPA develop new water-quality standards that will more effectively monitor and detect ocean acidification.

"The EPA agrees with the Center for Biological Diversity and other experts in the field that recent scientific research indicates that other ocean chemistry indicators and biological parameters, beyond pH, may be relevant for ocean acidification," the EPA wrote in its response letter to the petition.

For example, scientists have discovered that most corals can no longer grow if waters reach a certain point of corrosiveness.

The petition also asked the agency to publish guidance that will help states determine if their coastal waters are impaired by ocean acidification. In 2010, the EPA directed states to periodically evaluate the impacts of ocean acidification on their coastal waters under the Clean Water Act. The move came in response to a settlement of a lawsuit brought by the Center that claimed the EPA had failed to address the impairment of waters affected by ocean acidification off Washington state.

"We need a national plan to deal with ocean acidification, and the EPA's announcement that it will start to tackle the problem head-on is good news," said Sakashita.

The oceans absorb 22 million tons of carbon dioxide pollution each day, which is changing ocean chemistry. Seawater is becoming more acidic, which makes it difficult for animals to build the protective shells and skeletons they need to survive. Already, ocean acidification has caused massive oyster die-offs in the Pacific Northwest, sluggish coral growth in the Great Barrier Reef, and plankton to grow thinner, weaker shells in high latitudes.

To learn more, go to EndangeredOceans.org .

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 500,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

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