



U.S. CORAL REEF TASK FORCE

WATERSHED PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE STRATEGY

Updated: August 26, 2019

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Terminology and Abbreviations

USCRTF priority watershed:

A watershed location under the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force's Watershed Partnership Initiative where federal and jurisdictional agencies target restoration, pollution control, and monitoring to improve coral reef condition.

Other jurisdictional watershed:

A watershed location with ongoing restoration and pollution control activities, typically with participation of federal and local agencies and community groups. These watersheds are not coordinated by the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force's Watershed Partnership Initiative, but may benefit by sharing of plans, tools, lessons learned, and other knowledge and resources.

USCRTF:

U.S. Coral Reef Task Force – The U.S. Coral Reef Task Force was established in 1998 by Presidential Executive Order 13089 to lead U.S. efforts to preserve and protect coral reef ecosystems. The USCRTF includes leaders of 12 Federal agencies, seven States, Territories, and Commonwealths, and three Freely Associated States. The USCRTF helps build partnerships, strategies, and support for on-the-ground action to conserve coral reefs.

Graduation:

Local capacity has been established within the jurisdiction to sustainably manage a watershed that has completed the requirements set forth in this Strategy and is implementing actions in their watershed management plan that address impacts from land-based sources of pollution to improve coral reef condition. Graduated watersheds will have established

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local governance which includes sustainable funding and long-term local management of the watershed.

Alumni Watershed:

A graduate of the USCRTF Partnership Initiative that has developed capacity and sustainable governance systems to continue to implement actions and monitor ecosystems that demonstrate improving management capacity and continuing improvements to reduce threats to coral reef condition and improve resilience. Alumni will continue to receive post-graduation technical support from the USCRTF. Alumni are jurisdictional representatives expected to serve as leaders, assisting other Jurisdictions with input and advice on managing land-based sources of pollution.

Introduction

This document is the overarching strategy for the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force (USCRTF) Watershed Partnership Initiative (Initiative), which began in 2009 and was designated by USCRTF Resolution 28.1. This strategy includes a description of the USCRTF Watershed Working Group, the group's goals, objectives, and actions. This strategy provides guidelines for the identification, implementation and graduation of USCRTF priority watersheds. These guidelines were created with the intent of expanding the Watershed Partnership Initiative goals of building tools and opportunities that can be used in other watershed efforts across all jurisdictions.

Also included in this document are the following: 1) guidelines for the selection of future USCRTF priority watersheds; 2) a strategy for building stronger capacity at USCRTF priority and other jurisdictional watersheds; and 3) a description of how the overarching strategy will be evaluated.

This document is meant to be a living document, which will be updated and improved through experience, information gathered, and lessons learned.

The 2019 Amendment reflects lessons learned from the first 10 years of this program, and from implementing actions to reduce threats to coral reef condition in the three original priority watersheds.

USCRTF Priority Watersheds (*As of September 2019*) Guánica Bay/Rio Loco in southwest Puerto Rico (2009), West Maui, Hawai'i (2010), and Faga'alu in American Samoa (2012).

1. USCRTF Watershed Partnership Initiative

Resolution 28.1 (2012): <http://www.coralreef.gov/meeting28/pdf/watershed281.pdf>

Background: The USCRTF created the Watershed Partnership Initiative in 2009 and codified it in Resolution 28.1 in 2012. The intent of the Initiative is to facilitate and enhance coordination,

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partnerships, and contributions of agency resources and expertise to implement geographically specific and integrated activities to reduce land-based sources of pollutant loads to coral reef ecosystems. The Initiative also promotes consistent and strengthened application and enforcement of laws and authorities intended to address land-based sources of pollution (LBSP) threatening the health of coral reefs. In addition to strengthening partnerships (through shared funding and technical capacity), this Initiative focuses on building tools and opportunities that can be used by other watershed efforts. The Initiative built out this approach by piloting three selected priority watersheds, with the intent for future application to other watershed locations with likelihood for success. The Watershed Partnership Initiative targets areas where watersheds are adjacent to or associated with coral reef ecosystems.

Individual federal, state, territory, commonwealth agencies, and non-governmental organizations contribute through direct application of resources, authorities, technical assistance, and/or program expertise. Support for work in these USCRTF priority watersheds has been provided mainly via competitive grants, technical assistance, and in-kind support from numerous sources including, but not limited to, the local jurisdictions in which the USCRTF priority watersheds exist, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Coral Reef Conservation Program, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Targeted Objectives:

- Develop and implement on-the-ground strategies and actions that address land-based sources of pollution that impact coral reef condition;
- Maximize effectiveness of resource management by promoting multi-agency partnerships and contributions in each USCRTF priority watershed partnership;
- Develop and implement clear, targeted, multi-year ecosystem, programmatic, and community goals, objectives, and activities specific to each site, that results in measurable positive increases in coral reef ecologic metrics and have federal agency, local jurisdiction, and community support;
- Develop strategies to facilitate appropriate blending of traditional knowledge and science-based approaches for effective watershed management;
- Empower and increase the capacity of the local governments and communities to engage in watershed management practices that are protective of coral reefs for the long term;
- Use priority sites as test sites for building tools and a template for watershed success (e.g., empower communities to take on watershed management through partnerships) that can be shared and implemented in other watersheds and jurisdictions;
- Increase the likelihood of long-term watershed success by encouraging local government and community leadership involvement;
- Focus on being strategic and effective in helping USCRTF priority watersheds work towards success in a reasonable timeframe; and
- Implement actions to support the graduation of USCRTF priority watersheds to allow selection of new USCRTF priority watersheds.

2. USCRTF Watershed Working Group

The working group consists of staff from member agencies and jurisdictions, NFWF, and USCRTF priority

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and jurisdictional watershed coordinators. The working group meets monthly to implement Resolution 28.1, support watershed efforts and federal partnerships, and track metrics to measure success of LBSP reduction projects in the priority watersheds. Participation, development, and implementation of goals and actions are based upon the availability of appropriated funds, priorities, and policy guidance set forth by the President of the United States, the USCRTF, and member agencies and jurisdictions.

Goals:

- Support priority watershed projects and federal-jurisdictional partnerships;
- Facilitate exchange of information and lessons learned among priority and other jurisdictional watersheds;
- Develop tools for measuring success of priority watersheds and track progress;
- Develop long term strategy for the future of the Watershed Partnership Initiative;
- Leverage resources (funding and other assistance) of federal and local agencies to have maximum impact; and
- Collaborate and coordinate across agencies and jurisdictions on existing coral reef monitoring and management programs.

Actions by USCRTF Watershed Working Group:

- Meet monthly with USCRTF priority and jurisdictional watershed coordinators to facilitate partnerships;
- Provide learning and outreach opportunities for USCRTF priority and other jurisdictional watershed coordinators at USCRTF meetings;
- Organize a watershed learning workshop at jurisdictional USCRTF meetings targeted to local needs;
- Develop programmatic (2014), social (pending), and ecosystem metrics (2016) to measure success of LBSP reduction projects in the priority watersheds;
- Work with watershed coordinators to track progress toward metrics;
- Support creation of Implementation and Sustainability plans for each WPI site;
- Host webinars as learning experience for watershed coordinators/stakeholders in jurisdictions;
- Facilitate contributions of lessons learned from priority watershed coordinators; and
- Facilitate technical reviews of watershed plans by those with relevant experience.

3. Strategy for Implementing, Graduating, Discontinuing, and Initiating New USCRTF Priority Watersheds

The Initiative aims to build a framework to enhance coordination, partnerships, and access to agency technical resources and expertise in selected priority watersheds. The framework would then be applied to other watershed locations where successful application is likely to achieve the target objectives of the Initiative. Below is an outlined strategy for implementation, graduation, and a sustainable future of USCRTF priority watersheds, including a “sunset clause,” and criteria for selecting new priority watersheds.

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- A. USCRTF Priority Watersheds Implementation:** Every USCRTF priority watershed should have an Implementation Plan developed with partners and in place within the first few years of the watershed being identified as a USCRTF Priority Watershed. This plan should be updated at least every 2 years, or as needed, and may be a separate plan or part of the Watershed Management Plan, which is defined within the [USCRTF “Watershed Partnership Initiative - Programmatic Checklist”](#) as including, at a minimum, the nine elements listed in the U.S. EPA's "Handbook for Developing Watershed Plans to Restore and Protect Our Waters." This concise and functional management plan is meant to be a living document that will be adapted and updated as needed, based on factors such as funding available and monitoring results. The USCRTF may provide guidance and assistance to watershed coordinators, as needed, on their Implementation Plan, if requested.

Each Implementation Plan should outline, in detail, the critical steps (including entities and resources) involved in achieving the goals and objectives of their Watershed Management Plan/effort. The plan should specify the roles and responsibilities of USCRTF member agencies and partners. It should also provide metrics for measuring progress towards goals and adaptive management or similar process to evaluate, learn from, and potentially modify the implementation approach. Implementation plans will be led by the jurisdictions and the watershed coordinator, and developed in partnership with local watershed scientists/experts, key agencies, organizations, communities, and stakeholders, with guidance provided by the USCRTF. The Implementation Plan must include details for the timeframe that the watershed is a USCRTF priority watershed (up to 10 years) and this information (e.g., metrics) used to assess the watershed's progress towards graduation.

- B. USCRTF Priority Watershed Evaluation and Reporting:** In order for accurate evaluation to be conducted, baselines for pertinent ecosystem indicators should be collected as early as possible with a minimum of one stressor-based metric (e.g., sedimentation rates, etc.) and one biological metric (e.g., % Benthic cover, etc.) adequately characterized before implementation of interventions to reduce land-based sources of pollution (LBSP) stressors begins. Ecosystem indicators must include: 1) Process indicators for land-based sources of pollution to show intermediate results of the interventions implemented; and 2) Outcome indicators to show improvements in coral reef condition (see [“USCRTF Watershed Partnership Initiative Priority Ecosystem Indicators”](#) document). Minimum evaluative components are listed below:
- a. Complete/Update the **Programmatic Checklist** once every 2 years or at the request of the USCRTF; and
 - b. **Data collection and analysis** for the process and outcome ecosystem indicators should be compiled and assessed, consistent with the Watershed Management Plan, and at a minimum of every 5 years. Ecosystem process indicators will likely require 3-5 years to show improving trends. Longer term changes in metrics, specifically benthic condition, should be captured by Alumni Watersheds in ongoing reporting to the USCRTF.
 - c. **Reporting:** The progress towards the metrics should be reported out annually to the USCRTF by the jurisdictions, along with key USCRTF members supporting the watershed, so that issues in meeting the 10 year target are identified early. Early reporting of issues will allow the USCRTF and its member agencies to identify opportunities to assist in the watershed meeting a successful timeline. Alumni Watersheds will continue to report to

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show ongoing improvements in water quality and benthic metrics.

- C. Sustainability of Work and Funding:** A critical element of governance is long-term sustainability of work and funding. While identifying funding for implementing projects is important the WPI wants to focus on funding, for work and funds that are ongoing, such as funding for watershed coordinators and ongoing monitoring activities. Every USCRTF priority watershed designated after 2012 should have a **Sustainability Plan** developed within 5 years of the “USCRTF priority watershed” designation and implemented within 10 years of that designation. Applicable components of this plan should be included in the Watershed Management and/or Implementation Plans. This concise and functional sustainability plan is meant to be a living document that will be adapted and updated as needed. The USCRTF Watershed Working Group will provide a tool Jurisdictions can use to assist in developing sustainability plans. . Components of a Sustainability Plan are listed below.
- a. **Mechanism(s) for sustainable funding and finance** for the continuation of the watershed coordinator position and other key operational expenses. The general amount of funding needed for described types of work, and ownership of products, should be included.
 - b. **Commitment to support or institutionalization of the watershed coordinator**, through a variety of potential organizations and funding sources including non-governmental organizations or the Jurisdictional government;
 - c. **Commitment to support ongoing regular monitoring of ecosystem indicators** with local natural resource and water quality agencies or local college/university.
 - d. **Support from local government and community leadership and involvement in:**
 - i. **Water quality actions** (e.g., stormwater management, rain barrels, ponding basin, bio sacks, irrigation, inspection of construction sites, rules for new development, enforcement of existing rules on fisheries). These should have a monitoring strategy and be linked to performance measures tied to coral reef health.
 - ii. **Resource-related actions** (e.g., MPA’s, community-based fishery management, conservation easements on land, buffer zones around streams/shorelines, beach and stream cleanups).
 - e. Identify post-graduation support needs, including timeframe, which could require additional support from the USCRTF partners after graduation.

OR

In the case where a watershed is ready to graduate before or by the 10-year mark, a description and justification of why coordination of future watershed actions and funding are no longer needed in the foreseeable future should be written and submitted to the USCRTF by the Jurisdiction.

- f. For example, a watershed with one point source issue may not require coordination of further action if that point source is appropriately addressed, is not likely to return, and evaluation of that action is complete.

- D. Graduation:** A USCRTF priority watershed is considered “graduated” from the Initiative when:
- a. A graduation committee comprised of WWG Members and local watershed

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implementing partners agree the Priority Watershed has met the following criteria:

- i. initiated the major threat reduction projects from the watershed management plan,
 - ii. showed programmatic progress via the Programmatic Checklist,
 - iii. established local capacity and governance systems, which will ensure local long-term ownership of watershed management activities, including ongoing maintenance of BMPs and management practices.
 - iv. established a locally led monitoring program to measure changes in land-based sources of pollution trends and coral reef condition, and
 - v. the monitoring data, at locations where such measurements are scientifically appropriate, indicate a reduction of the land-based sources of pollution identified in the management plan to be impacting coral reef condition.
- b. Upon agreement on the criteria listed here, the graduation committee will make a recommendation to the full Watershed Working Group for the watershed to graduate.
 - c. The Watershed Working Group will make a recommendation to the USCRTF Steering Committee for final review.
 - d. Graduation will be highlighted during the Business Meeting at the next in person USCRTF Meeting.
 - i. The USCRTF Co-Chairs will provide a letter of graduation to the Jurisdiction that documents achievements and confirms that ongoing technical expertise will be made available.
- E. USCRTF Priority Watershed Alumni:** To ensure the graduated watersheds continue to thrive, the Watershed Working Group will keep alumni watersheds engaged, though with less reporting responsibilities. Alumni Watersheds will still be competitive for all federal funding opportunities but will no longer be eligible for USCRTF Priority Watershed specific funds (e.g., WPI grants via NFWF).
- a. Graduated watersheds can use the term “USCRTF Priority Watershed Alumni” in all materials, requests for funding, grant proposals, etc.
 - b. Watershed Coordinators are encouraged to continue to participate in monthly watershed working group calls and should plan to provide occasional updates.
 - i. Alumni Watershed Coordinators will also occasionally be asked to update the USCRTF on major accomplishments and monitoring results, to ensure continuing progress.
 - ii. The USCRTF expects the long-term monitoring to remain focused on showing improvements on coral reef indicators.
 - c. Graduated Watershed coordinators, contingent upon funding, will continue to be invited to The Watershed Coordinator’s Learning Exchange, to act as mentors to priority watershed coordinators in new WPI sites, , and provide input and guidance based on their experiences with the program and watershed management
- F. Sunset clause for future USCRTF Priority Watersheds:** The sunset clause applies to new (designated after 2012) USCRTF priority watersheds only. Those new sites will have been selected with the updated criteria listed below (see Section G). Existing USCRTF priority

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watersheds will build Sustainability Plans, which will be used to help determine when the USCRTF will move on to identifying other/new priority watershed sites. The objective for all USCRTF priority watersheds is to reach a measurable level of successful performance towards reducing impacts from land-based sources of pollution to support coral reef condition that allows the watershed management to move forward under jurisdictional support and allows the USCRTF and its members to focus on a new USCRTF priority watershed.

- a. Jurisdictions and key federal partners shall report out annually on the progress of the watershed in relation to the watershed specific metrics, identifying any key issues that may be impacting implementation and success. See Section B. USCRTF Priority Watershed Evaluation *and Reporting for more information.*

If at any time within the 10-year period jurisdictions and key federal partners identify an issue(s) that may warrant extension of the 10-year target, a special request must be submitted for approval by USCRTF members that clearly identifies as strong need to extend the status. This request must be accompanied by a proposed plan for the watershed to reach graduation and include a timeline of actions and land-based sources of pollution interventions to improve coral reef condition until the watershed's graduation.

- a. At the 10-year mark, the USCRTF will graduate the USCRTF priority watershed based on trends that show land-based sources of pollution improvements that are expected to support coral reef condition. Ten years was selected as a reasonable time frame for planning purposes towards showing measurable reductions in negative water quality impacts, unless an extension has been granted.

G. Discontinuation: A priority watershed may be discontinued at any point within the 10-year period if:

- a. Progress toward success is insufficient and unable to be corrected through actions of the jurisdiction and USCRTF members; or
- b. A catastrophic natural or anthropogenic event or political and/or policy change renders timely success unachievable.

H. Criteria for selecting new USCRTF priority watersheds: Addition of a new USCRTF priority watershed may be considered when a current USCRTF priority watershed is scaled back or graduated. New priority sites should be considered, particularly in jurisdictions without a previous USCRTF priority watershed, and vetted by local, academic, and federal experts (e.g., watershed, land-based sources of pollution, and coral reef experts,). In general, any site selected as a new or proposed USCRTF priority watershed should have a high likelihood for success within an agreed upon period. Selection as a USCRTF priority watershed may include, but not be limited to the following:

- a. Size of the watershed site should be conducive to demonstrating measurable reduction in impacts from land-based sources of pollution to support coral reef condition;
- b. Adjacent coastal areas/coral reefs should have favorable oceanographic conditions to facilitate recovery;
- c. Watershed impacts should be capable of being addressed by management actions/interventions within the capacity and authority of USCRTF agencies and jurisdictions;
- d. Documentation of the watershed's status relative to USCRTF watershed metrics and

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- evaluation questions;
- e. Full time, multi-year watershed coordinator in place;
 - f. Watershed Management Plan that identifies a specific controllable threat(s) and proposes explicit accomplishments within 5-8 years and will have measurable reduction in impacts from land-based sources of pollution to support coral reef condition within 10 years;
 - g. Baseline data on ecosystem indicators, including process and outcome indicators (e.g., land-based sources of pollution, coral condition). See Section B. *USCRTF Priority Watershed Evaluation*;
 - h. Local government capacity to support and participation;
 - i. Commitment of 2 or more federal agencies for support in watershed activities;
 - j. Centralized way to receive and manage money; and
 - k. Community-based support and participation.

If no watersheds meet all the criteria identified, the panel vetting the proposed watershed will provide a recommendations to the USCRTF on the best candidates with identified support from USCRTF members or partner organizations to meet the shortfall (e.g., funding to support a watershed coordinator, technical assistance to finalize the watershed management plan).

4. Strategy for Building Stronger Capacity at USCRTF Priority and Other Jurisdictional Watersheds

- Organize and host workshops associated with jurisdictional meetings to (1) address local issues and (2) showcase jurisdictional watershed efforts where federal agencies can contribute;
- Provide templates (e.g., watershed metrics, watershed plans) via website;
- Link federal funding opportunities with USCRTF watershed metrics;
- Provide funding support for watershed coordinator participation in USCRTF meetings for reporting;
- Host learning webinars targeted for local watershed coordinators/stakeholders;
- Provide opportunities for other jurisdictional watersheds to showcase their accomplishments and market their needs to USCRTF;
- Share activities and lessons learned between priority watershed coordinators and other jurisdictional watershed coordinators; and
- Designate a workgroup chair, to provide workgroup leadership and increase our capacity to work with the other jurisdictional watersheds.
- As resources allow, support the USCRTF, Watershed Coordinator's Learning Exchange conference calls and in-person meetings to share expertise and provide a forum for discussions on complete watershed challenges.

5. Strategy Evaluation

The Watershed Partnership Initiative Strategy shall be revisited at minimum every 5 years and updated, as appropriate. Future Strategy reviews shall include evaluation of progress within the priority watersheds and consideration for future funding or disinvestment.