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Coral Bleaching - Al's Statement

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Opening Remarks of

SENATOR AL GORE

Commerce Committee Hearing on

CORAL BLEACHING and GLOBAL WARMING

October 11, 1990

Good morning. I'd like to welcome you all to our hearing this morning and thank our Chairman, Senator Hollings, for providing us with the opportunity to explore the phenomena of coral bleaching and global warming -- subjects that I believe are deserving of our immediate attention. I look forward to learning about the latest developments in these fields, and I am sincerely grateful to our distinguished witnesses for taking time to share with us their observations and some of the results of their research.

Our attention turns to these issues in, I believe, a very timely fashion. As we will learn in greater detail from the scientists that join us today, the "news from the field" is alarming. Having suffered repeated bouts of bleaching, coral reefs are beginning to show signs

of exhaustion. To you and me, "bleaching" is like starvation. In the early 1980's, the reefs held on during times when they were without food, and were even able to rally back when their food supply was replenished. It seems, however, that their fight has gone on one round too many. Stressed and fatigued, the corals are now dying -- they no longer seem able to spring back from their injuries.

I believe that there is a profound message for us in the experience of the corals. These animals live "on the edge" in the biosphere. Acutely sensitive to many types of disturbances, the reefs act as a finely tuned radar system, and through some change -- for example in their color -- they will signal even relatively mild problems. Today, with their deaths, they are reacting in the most extreme manner, and it is at our peril that we turn a deaf ear to the alarm they are sounding. Coral reefs are some of the richest marine ecological systems in the world, and while they may best be appreciated for their decorative beauty, they play a key role in the marine ecosystems. The reefs provide shelter to a vast array of marine life, and, by breaking waves that pound the beach, they provide essential protection to people living in coastal communities in the United States and abroad.

But what is killing the corals? Our first panel of scientists⁵ have labored long and hard to try to solve this riddle. Although

they've been working with grossly inadequate resources, they have discovered an important clue: they have found that the frequency and severity of bleaching bouts is exactly correlated with unusually warm ocean temperatures. This discovery no doubt takes us closer to understanding the coral bleaching phenomenon. But really, to identify hot ocean water as the culprit is only to raise another question: why is the ocean getting hotter?

It is my hope that our second panel of experts will provide us with some provocative information in this regard. I realize that our format today is somewhat unusual, and that it may not be immediately obvious as to why we have asked atmospheric climatologists to join us in a discussion of an event that is happening in the oceans. But, it is becoming increasingly clear that the oceans and the atmosphere are inextricably interconnected. We know for example, that the oceans absorb heat from the atmosphere and that the reefs in particular play a critically important role in offsetting the buildup of carbon dioxide gas in the atmosphere.

Similarly, we know that our emissions of carbon dioxide have been increasing at an exponential rate, and that the demise of the coral reefs has occurred at the same time that we have witnessed five of the hottest years on record. Is there a link here? Does the death of the corals indicate that we are reaching a critical limit in the

earth's natural ability to absorb greenhouse gases? We cannot, of course, answer these questions today. But in hearing the latest from the oceanographers and the climatologists, I believe that we can take an important step forward in identifying some of the pieces of the puzzle.