

# The Palm Beach Post

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Final Edition

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## REEF OFF LANTANA BEACH THREATENED BY SILT

By HECTOR FLORIN

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Saturday, February 2, 2008

High levels of silt in sand being used to restore beach dunes in Lantana have led county officials to halt the project, even though it was already close to completion.

The nonprofit Palm Beach County Reef Rescue contacted the county's Environmental Resources Management Department about the silt and expressed concerns it would damage a nearby coral reef listed as threatened by the federal government.

A group of reef rescue members will dive to inspect the Staghorn coral this morning. It is one of only two species of coral to obtain the threatened status, in 2006.

The 11,000 cubic yards of sand used for the restoration came from a mine in Port St. Lucie that had been tested, and the state's Department of Environmental Protection approved it, said Dan Bates, director of the county's environmental enhancement and restoration division.

"It was only the late batch that failed," Bates said.

Restoration work, which began Jan. 7, stopped Thursday, and more tests of the sand were conducted Friday, Bates said. Similar restoration work on beaches in Jupiter and Singer Island has been completed.

Silt content almost twice the normal levels caused turbidity, or cloudiness, in the water, Bates said. "It's pretty small-scale," he said. "But you want to be extra careful about it." Bates said he does not expect any permanent environmental damage.

But silt can smother the coral, prevent it from feeding and affect its reproduction, said Ed Tichenor, director of Palm Beach County Reef Rescue.

"It's equivalent to shooting a bald eagle," he said.

Tichenor said another person notified the county two weeks ago about the high silt content, and he questioned Bates' assessment that only the last truckloads of sand contained the higher silt content.

Tichenor said all of the sand should be tested. "If it's all like that, it needs to be removed," he said.

Restoration projects will be halted during turtle-nesting season that runs from March 1 through Nov. 1, Bates said.

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## BAD SAND CLOUDS BEACH PROJECT

*The county says just one batch of the sand used in a renourishment project is faulty.*

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By CHRISTINE STAPLETON

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Sunday, February 3, 2008

Staghorn coral is not a memorable coral. Its color - brown - will not take your breath away. It does not sway with the current like an exotic purple sea fan or display bizarre patterns like a brain coral.

But the coral can stop a dump truck dead in its tracks, which it did last week at Lantana's municipal beach. Tons and tons of what appears to be gray talcum powder has been trucked onto the Lantana beach to restore the dune, washed away during Tropical Storm Noel last fall.

The problem is that the steep, 40-foot-tall gray hill of sand is washing into the ocean. Because it is more like silt than sand, it is covering the fragile reef like dust on a long-forgotten bookshelf. And since May 2006, when the staghorn and

elkhorn corals became the first corals to be listed as threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, the reef off Lantana's beach has been sacred ground. It is staghorn habitat.

On Saturday morning, members of Palm Beach County Reef Rescue and Cry of the Water dived to take samples and see what the reef looked like. They were not happy.



Photo by STEVE SPRING

Diver Ed Tichenor, director of Palm Beach County Reef Rescue, takes pictures Saturday south of Lantana's municipal beach. The group was checking for reef damage from sand used to restore dunes.

"What's it look like?" Reef Rescue Director Ed Tichenor called to Dan Clark, a member of Cry of the Water, before striding off the back of a dive boat.

"It sucks!" Clark yelled.

Clark's wife, Stephanie, stood on the shore, holding two clear soda bottles of samples taken Saturday. She shook them both. In one, the water quickly cleared and speckled gray sand settled on the bottom. The other became a thick gray milk. If anything settled, it could not be seen.

"To assess the long-term impact is difficult at this point," Tichenor said. "The quality of that sand is no good."

When the county obtained permits to renourish the dunes after the storm, it decided to buy sand from a mining company in Port St. Lucie. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection tested the consistency of the sand and approved it.

On Jan. 7, dump trucks started dumping huge piles of it in the beach's parking lot. It was then moved to a steep slope at the edge of the dune line.

Everything seemed fine until Greg Harrison, a retired veterinarian who has lived on the beach for years, noticed a whitish plume coming from the beach. He finally realized it was the silt washing into the ocean.

The bottom, which he had stared at for years during his daily swims, looked flat and dusty.

The fish were gone. The water was murky.

On Jan. 11, Harrison decided to make some calls. He tried the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society and the county.

Finally, he was told to call Tichenor, a longtime thorn in the side of environmental regulators. Tichenor made a call Wednesday. On Thursday the county tested the sand and shut down the restoration project, which is nearly complete.

The county's environmental director, Dan Bates, said it was only the "late batch that failed." Bates said he did not expect any permanent environmental damage.

Tichenor isn't so sure.

That massive mound of gray silt won't stay put. As with any dune and beach renourishment project, most of the sand will wash away. That worries Tichenor.

Tichenor hopes the county will take a core sample to determine whether earlier loads were also bad, despite the county's claims to have tested it. County officials have not said what happens next.

"It would cost millions for somebody to remove it," Tichenor said. "Our concern is somehow this made it onto the beach. The question is who is responsible."