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Deadly Coral Disease Now Affecting St. Croix; Scientists Rushing to Slow the Spread

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On August 14th members of the VI Coral Disease Advisory Committee (VI-CDAC) confirmed the first report of Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease (SCTLD) on the south shore of St. Croix, a release issued today has made known. Researchers and responders are working now to remove infected colonies surrounding Ruth Cay and survey the immediate area for any additional infected corals, the release said.

SCTLD is an unprecedented threat to coral reefs across the Caribbean and was first observed in the territory on the south side of St. Thomas in January of 2019, VI-CDAC said.

The disease is transmissible through water, spreads across reefs rapidly, and affects over half of all hard coral species in the Caribbean. Once affected, corals die over the course of weeks to months

which removes crucial reef habitat. Scientists across Florida and the Caribbean are working to uncover the cause of this disease and continue to document its devastating impacts, according to the release.

In the last 18 months the disease has spread all around St. Thomas and St. John, and scientists have confirmed sightings in the British Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. Strict dive gear decontamination protocol was put into practice as soon as the disease reached the US Virgin Islands to prevent disease spread to popular dive sites, and there had been no reports in St. Croix until now. How the disease reached St. Croix's reefs is being investigated, but preliminary evidence suggests ballast water from inter-island shipping vessels may have been a factor, VI-CDAC said.

Once a reef is affected, it is important to act quickly. The VI-CDAC team is working to deploy specially trained Strike Team divers to identify disease and treat sick corals across St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John, according to the release.

VI-CDAC is asking all divers, snorkelers, and anyone on the water to submit reports of sick or abnormal looking corals using DPNR's quick and easy Coral Health Report form found at www.vicoraldisease.org.

With the help of dedicated Strike Teams and volunteers, VI-CDAC aims to mitigate the impacts of this disease to local reefs and communities.

For more information and high-resolution photos contact Joseph Townsend, USVI Coral Disease Response Coordinator at joseph.townsend@dpnr.vi.gov or visit vicoraldisease.org.