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Sharing knowledge and tech this spawning season in Great Barrier Reef's largest restoration field trial

Photos and video available here.

With mass coral spawning underway on the Great Barrier Reef, researchers from the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) have begun work on one of the largest coral restoration field trials ever to be undertaken.

AIMS scientists and collaborators have been conducting research and development for over a decade on interventions to help climate change-threatened coral reefs. Many of these interventions take advantage of the Reef's annual synchronised mass spawning event in the Australasian Spring - an important time of reproduction and rejuvenation on the Reef.

While coral spawning research continues at AIMS' National Sea Simulator, researchers are also working in the field with Great Barrier Reef businesses and groups to strengthen their ability to trial reef restoration through the Pilot Deployments Program (PDP).

Partners, including Queensland coral aquaculture operators and Traditional Owner groups, have been on AIMS' Townsville site this week learning to operate ReefSeed units and apply conservation aquaculture techniques, so they can produce young corals at two industry facilities for deployment after the upcoming November full moon.

ReefSeed units are transportable, containerised coral aquaculture systems developed by AIMS. They are capable of producing millions of coral larvae, and hundreds of thousands of young corals for reefs in Australia and abroad. The first ReefSeed unit has already been installed and successfully tested in the Maldives.

Conservation aquaculture involves cultivating or rearing corals in a controlled environment on land in aquaculture facilities before transporting and seeding young corals on reefs.

With operations in the north and south of the GBR, the PDP trials this year aim to deliver up to 120,000 specially designed seeding devices to reefs around the Keppel Islands (Woppaburra sea Country) and off Cairns and Port Douglas, with multiple young corals settled onto every device.

AIMS has been working on efficiencies in processes to boost the number of devices put onto the Reef, going from 16,000 in 2024/25 to 44,000 in 2025/26, and up to 120,000 in 2026/27.

Other approaches that collect wild coral spawn will also be used to fertilise, rear and deploy young corals with partners from Indigenous ranger groups and the tourism industry.

Quotes

Attributed to AIMS' Dr Carly Randall on ReefSeed

"As we scale up these restoration trials, we're improving the processes and technologies needed to meet these goals. The containerised and transportable ReefSeed unit is one way to do that. It can be used in remote areas, and it's also modular - different components can be used outside of the ReefSeed system to bolster existing coral aquaculture systems. The components maximise fertilisation success and larval coral production, as well as reducing time and labour costs."

TOWNSVILLE (Headquarters)
PMB No.3,
Townsville MC, QLD 4810
T: +61 7 4753 4444
E: reception@aims.gov.au

DARWIN
PO Box 41775,
Casuarina, NT 0811
T: +61 8 8920 9240
E: reception@aims.gov.au

PERTH Indian Ocean Marine Research Centre
The University of Western Australia, M096
35 Stirling Highway, Crawley WA 6009
T: +61 8 6369 4000
E: WAadmin@aims.gov.au

aims.gov.au

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Attributed to AIMS' Dr Pirjo Haikola on PDP (her name is pronounced PEER-yoh HIGH-koh-lah)

"The PDP is all about using people power to scale up interventions. We are sharing knowledge, technologies and techniques with experts from Queensland coral aquaculture, and Indigenous Rangers which they can apply when they work on ReefSeed units to fertilise, rear and settle young corals ready for them to be deployed onto the Reef."

Attributed to Dean Pease, Director, Aus Fish Coral (coral aquaculture operator)

"Our business depends on a healthy Reef, so it makes sense for us to help look after its future. We're excited to host a ReefSeed unit at our aquaculture facility in Innisfail, and to apply the skills and expertise we use every day collecting, culturing and caring for corals to help put corals back on the Reef. We've worked with Traditional Owners from Jaragun Ecoservices since 2025 and are proud to be building local capability in reef restoration."

Attributed to Laura Simmons, Head of Life Sciences & Special Projects, Cairns Marine (coral aquaculture operator)

"Cairns Marine has a strong history of working with researchers and public aquaria around the world; being an industry partner in the PDP is such a natural fit. We are proud to be a part of this program for a second year and very excited to expand production by having a ReefSeed system operating at our facility in Cairns. We have decades of experience with the collection, handling, and husbandry of marine species, including corals; this experience, infrastructure, and capability help ensure successful delivery of deployment trials. By collaborating across a range of expertise and disciplines our industry is helping ensure the long-term health and resilience of our reefs."

Attributed to Talia Beaut, Science and Team Coordinator, Jaragun Ecoservices

"It's always refreshing to be a part of the coral spawning at AIMS because you see the integration of industry, First Nations and researchers supporting the coral lifecycle. Later this month, we'll continue it on through the ReefSeed unit in Innisfail on the AusFishCoral site. Just seeing and knowing those young corals will go out onto the Reef is an exciting experience for myself and Wanjuru Rangers to manage our Country."

Acknowledgements

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Led By AIMS, ReefSeed technology was developed under RRAP and made transportable with support from the G20 Coral Research and Development Accelerator Program (CORDAP). First used by the Maldives Marine Research Institute, trials have now expanded in Australia and internationally.

Media contact:

Jo Manning, Communications Officer: media@aims.gov.au; +61 456 196845

More about the Australian Institute of Marine Science:

The Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) is Australia's tropical marine research agency. In existence for half a century, it plays a pivotal role in providing large-scale, long-term and world-class research that helps governments, industry and the wider community to make informed decisions about the management of Australia's marine estate. AIMS science leads to healthier marine ecosystems; economic, social and environmental benefits for all Australians; and protection of coral reefs from climate change. More here: https://www.aims.gov.au/