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Feds agree that endangered Florida manatees need more habitat protection, but indefinitely delay protection

FLORIDA – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today that new critical habitat protections are warranted for Florida's endangered manatee, but the agency will wait for increased funding before it takes action. The notice, published in today's Federal Register, is in response to a petition to revise the manatee's critical habitat filed by Defenders of Wildlife, the Center for Biological Diversity, Save the Manatee Club, and the Wildlife Advocacy Project. According to the petition, revised habitat protections are warranted based on a vast body of science developed over the past three decades, which has better identified the areas essential to the survival and recovery of manatees, as well as the important features of each area.

"While we are pleased that the Service has again acknowledged the Florida manatee's need for updated protections, the fact remains that this acknowledgment won't actually help the species," said Patti Thompson, a leading manatee biologist and co-author of the petition for the Wildlife Advocacy project. "We stand by the science in our petition and we stand by our call for prompt action to protect this iconic Florida animal."

The Florida manatee was one of the first species listed under the Endangered Species Act and among the first to have critical habitat designated for protection. These protections have helped slow the decline of manatees and promoted their conservation, but manatees still face a host of threats, and new habitat protections are urgently needed.

"Today's decision to withhold critical habitat protections puts the Florida manatee in an administrative purgatory," said Miyoko Sakashita oceans director at the Center for Biological Diversity. "Endangered species don't have much time to wait for bureaucracy, and the last stand of precious habitat may be developed or destroyed while manatees await needed protections."

Manatee habitat is threatened by a variety of factors, such as: Coastal development, propeller scarring and seagrass damage, dams and other water control structures, and pollution and marine debris, including derelict fishing gear. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, more than seven times the sustainable level of Florida's manatees are killed each year by human activities, including vessel collisions. This past year was an especially deadly one for the Florida manatee – setting a new record with 429 manatee deaths in state waters. Records were set for cold stress-related deaths (56), watercraft-related fatalities (97) and 114 newborn deaths.

“With this year’s record deaths and looming threats, the species clearly needs all the help it can get,” said Elizabeth Fleming, Florida representative for Defenders of Wildlife. “Despite the Service’s determination on critical habitat, we will continue to work for any and all protections that will stop these tragedies and ultimately help the species recover.”

“Much is at stake regarding the appropriate designation and protection of the endangered manatee’s critical habitat, upon which countless other sensitive aquatic species also depend for their very existence,” said Patrick Rose, Save the Manatee Club Executive Director and manatee expert. “We are committed to working with the USFWS to ensure that the money is found to both update the designation and to reduce the out of control, record breaking watercraft and total mortality that manatees endured during 2009.”

Today’s announcement means that the Fish and Wildlife Service, despite recognizing that critical habitat designation would benefit the conservation of Florida’s endangered manatee, will most likely put off any action indefinitely.

“With manatee deaths at an all-time high, it is unfortunate that the Service has relegated this vitally important rulemaking to the backburner indefinitely, said Eric Glitzenstein, President for Wildlife Advocacy Project. “The Service should instead be embracing it as an important opportunity to stem the ever-increasing tide of manatee mortalities and injuries.”

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The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 225,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places. For more information, visit www.biologicaldiversity.org.

Defenders of Wildlife is dedicated to the protection of all native animals and plants in their natural communities. With more than 1 million members and activists, Defenders of Wildlife is a leading advocate for innovative solutions to safeguard our wildlife heritage for generations to come. For more information, visit www.defenders.org

Save the Manatee Club was established in 1981 to protect manatees and their aquatic habitat for future generations and today, it is the world’s leading manatee conservation organization. The Club is a membership-based, national nonprofit organization that promotes public awareness and education; sponsors local and international scientific research and rescue, rehabilitation, and release efforts; and advocates for the conservation of manatees and their essential habitat based on the best available scientific data. For more information, please visit www.savethemanatee.org

***The Wildlife Advocacy Project** is a non-profit advocacy organization that seeks to complement and supplement the efforts of grassroots wildlife protection activists to win long-lasting conservation benefits for animals and the planet. It pursues its mission through publication education and science-based advocacy, and urges recognition and respect for the innate wild nature of all wildlife, whether in the wild or held in captivity. For more information, visit www.wildlifeadvocacy.org.*