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Florida's Endangered Manatees May Get New Habitat Protection

SAN FRANCISCO— The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today that new critical habitat protections may be warranted for the Florida manatee. The notice, published in today's Federal Register, is in response to a petition to revise the manatee's critical habitat filed by the Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife, Save the Manatee Club, and the Wildlife Advocacy Project. According to the petition, manatees need new protected habitat because a vast body of science has developed about what areas are essential to the survival of manatees since the critical habitat was originally designated in 1976.

Patti Thompson, a leading manatee biologist who co-authored the petition for the Wildlife Advocacy Project, said she is "pleased that the Service is moving forward with this long overdue strengthening of the manatee's habitat designation. Our petition is designed not only to update the geographic areas using the latest available scientific information, but also to address the absence in the current designation of required 'constituent elements' that must be protected, such as warm water, travel corridors, and food sources. Although these omissions were understandable when manatee critical habitat was first designated more than 30 years ago, it is vitally important that the designation now be based on the best science available."

"Habitat protection is the key to ensuring the recovery of Florida's endangered manatees," said Miyoko Sakashita, oceans program director at the Center for Biological Diversity. "Today's announcement is an important step toward reducing threats to manatees and preserving Florida's natural heritage."

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.

“Save the Manatee Club looks forward to working closely with the Fish and Wildlife Service to undertake this essential and long overdue effort to identify and protect habitat critical to the manatee’s long term survival,” said Pat Rose, executive director of Save the Manatee Club.

Critical habitat designation is meant to identify the areas that are essential for the manatee’s conservation and recovery. “Updating the critical habitat designation will ensure that the best available science is used to protect manatee habitat,” said Elizabeth Fleming, Florida representative of Defenders of Wildlife.

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.

Today’s announcement means that the Fish and Wildlife Service will conduct a full review of scientific information to determine whether additional critical habitat protections are needed. Critical habitat designation is an important layer of protection that means that any federal activity conducted in the area must undergo environmental review to ensure that it does not harm or destroy the manatee’s habitat. A rule proposing new critical habitat is due by December 19, 2009, a year from the date the petition was filed.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is soliciting information and accepting comments on manatee critical habitat for 30 days.

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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