



U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Florida Manatee Recovery Plan, 3rd Revision Frequently Asked Questions

(updated October 30, 2001)

Q1: What is a recovery plan?

A1: A recovery plan is required for all listed species under the Endangered Species Act and provides information on the management and research activities related to recovery of an endangered or threatened species. Information included provides a framework for actions by the Service and its partners to take toward protecting a federally-listed species and its habitat with a goal of recovering that species to a point its population is self-sustaining and no longer needs protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The actions and guidelines are non-regulatory in nature and provide a means to achieve recovery criteria, as well as, address current and potential threats to a listed species.

Q2: What is the Manatee Recovery Plan's history?

A2: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) developed the initial recovery plan for West Indian manatee in 1980. This plan focused primarily on manatees in Florida, but included Antillean manatees in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. In 1986, the FWS adopted a separate recovery plan for manatees in Puerto Rico.

To reflect new information and planning needs for manatees in Florida, the FWS revised the original plan in 1989 and focused exclusively on the Florida manatee. This first revision covered a 5-year planning period ending in 1994. The FWS revised and updated the plan again in 1996, which again covered a 5-year planning period ending in 2000.

In 1999, the FWS initiated the process to revise the plan for a third time. An 18-member recovery team, made up of both public and private groups that have an interest in manatee recovery and/or could be affected by proposed recovery actions, was established to assist the Service in drafting this revision.

Comments and information received during the public comment period on the first draft revision, released in November 2000, resulted in changes to the recovery criteria section of the plan. As a result, the Service felt it appropriate to release a second draft revision (July 2001) for public comment prior to finalizing the plan.

Q3: Why is the plan being revised?

A3: The Service regularly reviews recovery plans to ensure the most current information is being considered in our actions to recover federally-listed species.

Q4: How does the 3rd revision differ from its predecessor?

A4: In this revision to the manatee recovery plan, the Service recognizes that significant progress has been made towards recovery and that the species may warrant reclassification to threatened status, if recovery criteria are met and threats are reduced or removed. Additionally, great care has been taken in this revision to provide what the Service believes are “objective measurable criteria” which, when met, would result in a determination that the species be removed from the list of threatened and endangered species. These criteria set benchmarks for standard population demographics such as survival and growth rate, that are a means to evaluate the success of conservation measures to reduce or remove existing and long-term threats to recovery. The recovery criteria specifically relate to the threats identified in the Endangered Species Act’s (ESA) five (5) listing factors.

Q5: Who developed the recovery plan?

A5: The Service is responsible for developing recovery plans for all federally-listed species, except those under the jurisdiction of the National Marine Fisheries Service. In the case of the Florida manatee, the Service created an 18-member recovery team, made up of the both public and private groups that have an interest in manatee recovery and/or could be affected by proposed recovery actions, to assist the Service in drafting this revision. The recovery team assisted the Service by locating and evaluating current manatee research and management efforts and providing the Service with its findings and recommendations.

Q6: Does the general public have input to the plan’s recovery criteria or proposed action items?

A6: Yes, we sought public input and comment on the plan. In fact, information received during the public comment periods, of which there were two, was instrumental in assisting the Service in developing this third revision.

Q7 - How many comments were received?

A7 - The Service received close to 3,000 comments during the two public comment periods. Comments were received from various conservation organizations, Federal, State and local agencies, industry groups, conservation groups, citizen organizations, scientists, private citizens, and as a result of email “action alerts”.

Q8: When will there be enough manatees to reclassify or remove the species from the Endangered Species List?

A8: The Service recognizes that significant progress has been made towards recovery and that the status of the species may warrant reclassification to threatened status, if recovery criteria are met and threats are reduced or removed. The focus should not be on how many manatees there are, but on whether or not threats to the species’ existence are being reduced. Even under the best circumstances, complete recovery of this species is difficult to predict. Resolving long-term threats may take many years.

Q9: Is there enough habitat to support the current and future manatee populations?

A9: Current levels of seagrass and other aquatic vegetation (which provide food for manatees) seem to be sufficient for survival of the species. However, the Plan recommends identification and protection of important feeding areas near wintering sites. This will allow manatees places to feed in the winter without risking overexposure to the cold.

Q10: How does the Plan address the overall manatee population?

A10: The Plan divides the overall population of Florida manatees into four subpopulations or regions. It recommends all four regions to be secure in order for the species to be completely removed from the list of threatened and endangered species. Presently, manatees that spend most of their time in the Upper St. Johns River and Northwest Peninsular Florida are doing very well. Less is known about the larger subpopulations along the Atlantic Coast and Southwest Florida. Scientists hope to have a better idea about manatee status in these areas next year (2002).

Q11: How has the Service addressed the concern that we ignored our own scientific advisory group's recommendations for demographic recovery criteria?

A11: In fact, the Service accepted virtually all of the scientists' recommendations for recovery. The Service adopted their recommendations to consider the overall population as four subpopulations, establishing recovery goals for each. The Service accepted the scientists' recommendations not to set a population goal for recovery, instead developing demographic criteria to gauge success and health of the population. The Service accepted the scientists' recommendations to monitor adult survival, reproduction, and population growth and that these rates reflect a stable or increasing population with statistical confidence. The Service did not include in our recovery criteria the scientists' recommendations for demographic targets (ie: 94% survival and a 4% population growth) as those numbers currently are not supported in the published literature. However, the Service has left the door open to update the recovery criteria if scientific studies indicate that other survival, reproduction, or population growth rates or other population indices are more appropriate for demographic recovery criteria.

Q12: What is being done to address the warm water needs for wintering manatees?

A12: This revision to the plan recommends protection of flows at key natural springs and other warm water sources. It also recommends a careful evaluation of those areas where manatees have become dependent on power plant discharges.

Q13 - What is being done to address watercraft-related manatee mortality?

A13 - This revision to the plan recommends establishment and adequate enforcement of manatee protection areas, including refuges (speed zones) and sanctuaries, as a way to address near term needs. In addition to manatee protection areas and enforcement, the plan recommends additional conservation measures, such as boater education and county manatee protection plans, to meet long term recovery goals.

Q14: Is the recovery plan part of the Service's other regulatory efforts, such as manatee refuges and sanctuaries?

A14: The recovery plan is non-regulatory in nature and serves as the primary guiding document for the Service and its partners in managing efforts to recover the Florida manatee. While the regulatory actions the Service may pursue are independent of the recovery plan, they do serve as a management tool in implementing the actions set forth in the Plan.

Q15: Where can I find more information or get on your contact list for information on future actions related manatees?

A15: Visit our web site at <http://northflorida.fws.gov> or call us at 904-232-2580 x109 to be added the contact list or to request more information.

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