



Proposed Manatee Protection Areas

Background

Manatees are a federally protected species under both the Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act. Boat-related mortality in manatees probably poses the greatest human-caused threat to the species. Historically, collisions with watercraft are responsible for about 25 percent of all manatee deaths and about 80 percent of all human-caused mortality in manatees. Nearly 47 percent of these boat-related deaths occur in just four of the 34 counties in which manatees are found. Successful recovery of the manatee is greatly dependent on controlling and reducing this source of injury and mortality.

In January 2000, Save the Manatee Club and several other groups and individuals filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers alleging violations of the Endangered Species Act, Marine Mammal Protection Act, National Environmental Policy Act, and Administrative Procedure Act. Four groups representing development and boating interests intervened.

Issue

A settlement agreement was reached and ratified by the U.S. District Court in January 2001. Generally, the settlement requires us to implement actions that we were in the process of doing. It established a set of target dates for completing certain tasks and clearly defined the communication requirements for all parties involved.

Among the tasks to be accomplished is the comprehensive review of current manatee protection areas throughout Florida with a goal of designating additional protection areas where warranted.

This review process, which actually began prior to the lawsuit, was formally announced to the public in September 2000. After getting recommendations from various agencies (Federal, State, and local), field biologists, researchers and conservationist, we compiled a list of over 145 **potential** sites which had been presented to us for review. We then engaged the general public by holding six (6) workshops in December 2000, in which we solicited comments, suggestions and additional recommendations.

Status

We have completed our review of all the recommendations, pre-proposal comments, and best available biological data. On August 3, we submitted a proposed rule to the *Federal Register*. A public comment period will be open for 60 days following the actual publication of the proposed rule. Comments must be received within 60 days of the publication date. A public hearing is scheduled for September 13 from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Radisson Inn in Melbourne, Brevard County, FL. Requests for additional public hearings must be received in writing within 30 days of the proposed rule's actual publication date.

In our proposal, we have identified eight (8) counties where we believe Federal actions may be warranted, and have proposed the establishment of 16 manatee protection areas based on the biological needs of the species.

Questions?

The proposed rule, environmental assessment and information on the 16 proposed manatee protection areas, as well as other Service manatee initiatives, are available on the Internet at <http://northflorida.fws.gov>.

If you have specific questions or need special assistance, please contact our Jacksonville Field Office at 904-232-2580, ext. 109.

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