



United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0905

BILL NELSON
FLORIDA

April 7, 2016

The Honorable Dan Ashe
Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Director Ashe,

I write in strong opposition to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) proposal to downgrade the West Indian manatee from an endangered species to a threatened one. I do not believe there is sufficient scientific support for a reclassification at this time.

Manatees have been listed as endangered since 1967 due to threats from pollution, habitat loss, and speeding boats. All of these hazards remain today, and there is no indication that such threats will decrease in the future. Instead, manatees will likely face new or more severe threats from climate change, seagrass loss, and habitat destruction.

In particular, poor water quality poses an immediate risk to manatees in Florida today. Since the FWS proposal was released in January, Florida experienced sweeping algal blooms, massive fish kills, and extensive seagrass loss. The water quality problems in manatee habitats across the state are a haunting reminder of the summer of 2013, a year in which 830 manatee deaths were reported—almost double the annual average.

It took decades of public education, recovery actions, and conservation practices to bring the manatee population in Florida to its current level of about 6,300. In other parts of the world, however, there was not the same concerted, widespread effort. In fact, according to the FWS findings, "population trends are declining or unknown in 84 percent of the countries where manatees are found."

In addition, there is not yet an accurate or comprehensive understanding of the recent declines in manatee populations in Florida. In the past six years, there were three major mortality events when at least 2,822 manatees died, according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Severe cold weather caused manatee die-offs in 2010 and 2011. A red tide event in 2013 caused 276 manatee deaths, while an additional 110 manatees died in the Indian River Lagoon from an unknown cause. Until this cause is both known and addressed, FWS should not move forward with reclassification.

Not only is a downgrading premature, it is also potentially dangerous to long-term recovery efforts. For example, since the FWS proposal was released, at least one county in Florida has already made attempts to roll back existing protections like slow-speed zones for boats, which help to protect manatees.

Threats to the Florida manatee are too great to warrant a change to its listing at this time. I urge you to maintain the endangered listing for this iconic species to ensure its permanent legacy in Florida.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bill Nelson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.