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EPA to Be Sued for Failure to Protect Manatees From Water Pollution

Hundreds of Manatees Starved to Death Due to Catastrophic Loss of Seagrasses Caused by Florida's Unchecked Water Pollution

ST. PETERSBURG, *Fla.*— Three conservation groups issued a formal [notice](#) today of their intent to sue the Environmental Protection Agency for failing to protect manatees from water pollution in Florida.

Over half of the more than 1,000 manatee deaths in Florida this year were attributable to starvation. The mass die-off was caused by pollution-fueled algae blooms that killed thousands of acres of seagrass in the Indian River Lagoon, highlighting the inadequacy of the state's federally approved water-quality standards.

In today's notice letter, the Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife, and Save the Manatee Club asked the EPA to reinstate consultation with the Fish and Wildlife Service to re-assess the water-quality standards.

"It's disgraceful that hundreds of manatees have died as a direct result of regulators' failure to protect our water quality," said Jaclyn Lopez, Florida director at the Center. "The Indian River Lagoon is an ecological wonder that supports not just manatees, but green sea turtles, snook, tarpon and a stunning diversity of marine life. The mass death of these manatees, which was completely preventable, makes it clear just how critical it is that the EPA take swift action to protect the vibrant ecosystem they live in before it's too late."

The officially declared "Unusual Mortality Event" occurred in the Indian River Lagoon, which includes important warm-water habitat for manatees and supports more species of plants and animals than any other estuary in North America.

Unchecked pollution in the estuary — stemming from wastewater-treatment discharges, leaking septic systems, and fertilizer runoff — fuels algae outbreaks that kill seagrass and prevent it from growing back. Despite extensive evidence of that harmful pollution and Florida's failure to address it, the EPA approved the state's water-quality criteria for nitrogen, phosphorous and dissolved oxygen, concluding the standards would not "adversely affect" manatees.

“Until Florida is forced to rein in its rampant pollution, manatees will continue to die slow, agonizing deaths by starvation every winter,” said Lindsay Dubin, staff attorney at Defenders of Wildlife. “The EPA must act immediately to improve water-quality standards lest it further jeopardize the future of this iconic species.”

More than 1,000 manatees have died in Florida this year, more than doubling their average annual death rate over five years. The number of deaths represent 19% of the Atlantic population of Florida manatees and 12% of all manatees in Florida.

“It is painfully clear that Florida isn’t doing what’s necessary to control the sewage and fertilizer pollution that’s wrecking our public waters,” said Earthjustice attorney Elizabeth Forsyth. “It’s time for EPA to step in and enforce the Clean Water Act for the sake of the manatees and all the other creatures — and people — that rely on Florida’s waterways. If watching manatees starve isn’t the tipping point for the EPA to step in, I don’t know what is.”

Manatee experts predict that the high levels of malnourished and starving manatees will continue throughout the winter in the lagoon and recently announced plans for supplemental feeding.

“For over a decade, Save the Manatee Club and other conservation scientists have been warning politicians about this problem. It is entirely due to a failure to rein in polluters that this foreseeable and preventable tragedy is occurring. We have exhausted our options at the state level. It is up to the federal agencies who are ultimately responsible for approving these failed standards to step in and correct course before it is truly too late,” said Patrick Rose, an aquatic biologist and executive director of Save the Manatee Club who has worked for over 45 years to help bring the species back from near-extinction since it was first listed as endangered in 1967.

Manatees were downlisted to threatened in 2017 and since then have suffered significant setbacks from habitat degradation, red tide, unusually cold winters and now unprecedented mass starvation from the catastrophic seagrass die-off within its officially designated critical habitat.

Today’s notice gives the agencies 60 days to address the violations alleged in the letter before the groups file a lawsuit. The conservation groups are represented by attorneys with Earthjustice.



Florida manatee/USFWS. This photo is [available](#) for media use.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.7 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

Defenders of Wildlife is dedicated to the protection of all native animals and plants in their natural communities. With nearly 2.2 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 [Defenders.org/newsroom](https://www.defenders.org/newsroom) and follow us on Twitter [@Defenders](https://twitter.com/Defenders).

Save the Manatee Club is an international nonprofit based in Florida with its mission to protect manatees and their aquatic habitat for future generations. The Club was founded in 1981 by former Florida Governor and U.S. Senator Bob Graham and singer-songwriter Jimmy Buffett to protect and advocate on behalf of the species. Today, Save the Manatee Club is the world's leading manatee conservation organization. To learn more about the world's leading voice for manatees, visit [savethemanatee.org](https://www.savethemanatee.org)

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