

Media Contacts:

Elizabeth Forsyth, Earthjustice, (206) 531-0841, eforsyth@earthjustice.org

Ragan Whitlock, Center for Biological Diversity, (727) 426-3653, rwhitlock@biologicaldiversity.org

Patrick Rose, Save the Manatee Club, (850) 570-1373, prose@savethemanatee.org

Jake Bleich, Defenders of Wildlife, (202) 772-3208, jbleich@defenders.org

Lawsuit: EPA Must Protect Manatees from Water Pollution

Hundreds Starved to Death in 2021 Because Unchecked Pollution is Killing Seagrass

May 10, 2022

[View online](#)

Orlando, FL - Three conservation groups [sued](#) the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency today for failing to protect manatees and sea turtles from water pollution in Florida.

Over half of the more than 1,000 manatee deaths in Florida in 2021 were attributable to starvation. The mass die-off is being caused by pollution-fueled algal blooms that have killed thousands of acres of seagrass in the Indian River Lagoon, highlighting the inadequacy of the state's federally-approved water quality standards.

Earthjustice is representing the Center for Biological Diversity, Save the Manatee Club and Defenders of Wildlife. Today's lawsuit, filed in the Middle District of Florida, pushes the court to require EPA to reinstate consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service under the Endangered Species Act to reassess its approval of Florida's water quality standards for the Indian River Lagoon.

The Florida manatee is currently experiencing an officially-declared "Unusual Mortality Event" along Florida's east coast, which includes important manatee warm-water habitat like the Indian River Lagoon. The lagoon supports more species of plants and animals than any other estuary in North America.

"Manatees need clean water to live in – it's that simple," said Earthjustice attorney Elizabeth Forsyth. "The pollution in the Indian River Lagoon is preventable. We're asking EPA to step in and ensure the protection of the Indian River Lagoon and the species that depend on it."

Unchecked pollution in the Indian River Lagoon — stemming from wastewater-treatment discharges, leaking septic systems, fertilizer runoff and other sources — fuels algal blooms that kill seagrass and prevent it from growing back. Nearly a decade ago, EPA approved the state's water quality criteria for nitrogen and phosphorous, concluding the standards would not "adversely affect" manatees. New information, including the mass die-off of manatees in the lagoon, calls this conclusion into question.

“Hundreds of manatees are dying in the Indian River Lagoon as the water quality plummets, and the EPA must confront the massive nutrient pollution behind this disaster,” said Ragan Whitlock, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity. “The existing water quality standards just aren’t strong enough to preserve this important ecosystem and save these amazing animals.”

Florida’s 2021 manatee deaths were more than double the average annual death rate over the previous five years. The number of deaths represents 19% of the Atlantic population of Florida manatees and 12.5% of all manatees in Florida.

“Florida’s beloved manatees will continue to suffer and die as long as EPA maintains inadequate water quality standards,” said Jane Davenport, senior attorney at Defenders of Wildlife. “There simply is no more time for EPA to waste in reinitiating consultation.”

State and federal agency staff continued to witness high levels of malnourished and starving manatees throughout the winter of 2021-22, implementing a first-of-its-kind supplemental feeding program. In recent weeks, the surrounding water has warmed, causing the manatees to disperse, and the program has been suspended. Unfortunately, many manatees continue to suffer the long-term health consequences of starvation.

“Although nothing we do will bring back those nearly 1,000 manatees that suffered and died from years of neglect despite repeated warnings, we insist that the EPA join forces with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service to ensure that improved water quality standards are expeditiously set and met to bring an end to this travesty.” 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.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service downlisted the manatee from endangered to threatened in 2017. Since then, the species has suffered significant setbacks from habitat degradation, red tide, cold winters and now unprecedented mass starvation from the catastrophic seagrass die-off.

[Earthjustice](#), the nation’s premier nonprofit environmental law organization, wields the power of law and the strength of partnership to protect people’s health, to preserve magnificent places and wildlife, to advance clean energy, and to combat climate change. Because the earth needs a good lawyer.

[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.

[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

[Defenders of Wildlife](#) is celebrating 75 years of protecting all native animals and plants in their natural communities. With a nationwide network of 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 and follow us on Twitter [@Defenders](https://twitter.com/Defenders).