

For Immediate Release, June 1, 2022

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Legal Agreement Will Protect Critical Habitat for Threatened Florida Manatee

Federal Officials Agree Manatee Habitat Needs Protection

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla.— In a legal agreement with the Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife and Save the Manatee Club, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has committed to revise critical habitat for the Florida manatee by September 2024. The manatee’s critical habitat has not been updated since its original designation in 1976.

“Safeguarding the places where manatees live will help put these incredibly imperiled animals back on a path toward recovery,” said Ragan Whitlock, a Florida-based attorney at the Center. “Protecting the habitat of these magnificent creatures is long overdue, but we’re happy these safeguards will soon be in place.”

A record-setting 1,100 Florida manatees died in 2021, mostly because of starvation caused by water pollution in the Indian River Lagoon. This trend has continued into 2022, as the Florida manatee continues to face significant threats to its survival in the lagoon and throughout Florida, where harmful algae blooms and the loss of seagrass and warm-water refuges continue to shrink its habitat.

“This agreement is a vital first step toward ending the mass manatee deaths that have become all too common along Florida’s coasts,” said Jane Davenport, senior attorney at Defenders of Wildlife. “Once the species’ current critical habitat is identified, we’re hopeful that federal, state, and private conservation partners can take decisive action to put the manatee back on the road to recovery.”

“The Service has delayed revising critical habitat for a decade, and now the manatee’s predicament is so dire that revising critical habitat can no longer be put on the back burner,” said Pat Rose, Executive Director of Save the Manatee Club. “We are pleased that FWS is finally willing to take this essential step to save our imperiled manatees and hope this signals a shift in prioritizing manatee survival and recovery.”

The Center, along with Save the Manatee Club, Wildlife Advocacy Project and Defenders of Wildlife, [petitioned](#) the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2008 to revise critical habitat for the Florida manatee. The Service found that revisions to critical

habitat [were warranted](#) in January 2010 but failed to act for more than 12 years. The Center, Save the Manatee Club and Defenders of Wildlife filed [suit](#) in February 2022 seeking this action.

Animals with federally protected critical habitat are more than [twice as likely](#) to be moving toward recovery than species without it. Federal agencies that fund or permit projects in critical habitat are required to consult with the Service to ensure this habitat is not harmed or destroyed by their actions.

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).