

Government to remap manatee habitat

September 30 2009, By Curtis Morgan

It has been more than 30 years since federal wildlife managers formally mapped the places where endangered manatee live in Florida. On Tuesday, they acknowledged it's probably time for an update.

The U.S. Fish and [Wildlife](#) Service announced it would consider reassessing critical habitat for the manatee, a process that could fill some gaping holes.

Among the places left out of an original designation, done in 1976: natural springs, water basins around power plants that serve as winter havens for sea cows and two entire counties in a major manatee corridor, St. Lucie and Indian River.

Boat strikes killed 11 manatees in Indian River and six in St. Lucie last year.

Chuck Underwood, a spokesman for the service, said the decision is mostly about updating science and would not affect coastal development or public access.

"It really doesn't make a huge change in what is already being done out there in the manatee world," he said.

Pat Rose, executive director of the Save the Manatee Club, said the designation can help safeguard prime manatee grounds, particularly from the effects of large-scale projects such as dredging that might impact water quality or sea grass beds.

Rose stressed the club, which petitioned the service to review the habitat map along with the Center for Biological Diversity, Wildlife Advocacy Project and Defenders of Wildlife, was not looking to impose more restrictions on the manatee's biggest nemesis, motorboats.

Despite an array of slow-speed and no-wake zones, boats killed 90 manatees last year in Florida, five short of the record, set in 2002. "We're not trying through this process to add a bunch of new places so there can be a lot of new boating regulations," Rose said.

Waterways in 17 Florida counties are already designated critical habitat for manatees.

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