

Florida manatee deaths soar as polluted water kills seagrass

October 26 2021, by Curt Anderson



In this Dec. 28, 2010, file photo, a group of manatees are in a canal where discharge from a nearby Florida Power & Light plant warms the water in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. Florida is experiencing an unprecedented die-off of manatees this year, with 959 documented deaths as of mid-October. Credit: AP Photo/Lynne Sladky, File

Florida fishing guide and environmental activist Paul Fafeita says a highlight for his charter customers is spotting the manatees that forage for seagrass in shallow waters. It's not so thrilling when they come across the emaciated carcass of a manatee that starved to death.

"It's not good when you've got clients on the boat and all of a sudden there's a dead manatee," Fafeita, president of the Clean Water Coalition of Indian River County, said during a recent excursion in the Indian River Lagoon, a favorite hangout for the marine mammals along Florida's east coast. "They're wanting to see them. They don't want to see them dead."

Florida is experiencing an unprecedented die-off of manatees this year, with 959 documented deaths as of Oct. 1. That's already more than any full year on record, and colder weather soon to come could bring another wave of deaths in a population that numbers between 7,500 and 10,200 along both Florida coasts, according to state estimates.

Manatee deaths this year will likely double the 593 recorded in 2020, and will far outnumber the latest five-year average of 146 deaths in Florida, [according to state figures, with no end to the die-off in sight.](#)

"There is a huge sense of urgency," said Gil McRae, director of the state Fish and Wildlife Research Institute. "We're uncertain how long it's (high manatee deaths) going to be."

The reason? Seagrass on which the so-called sea cows depend also is dying as water quality declines due to fertilizer runoff, wastewater discharges and polluted water that is increasingly diverted on purpose from Lake Okeechobee to coastal estuaries.

These manmade pollutants can cause algae blooms so thick that seagrass can't get the sunlight it needs to survive, jeopardizing the manatees' main

food supply. Since 2009 about 58% of the seagrass has been lost in the Indian River Lagoon, state estimates show.

"The cold hard fact is: Florida is at a water quality and climate crossroads, and manatees are our canary in the coal mine," said J.P. Brooker, Florida director for the Ocean Conservancy environmental group, in an opinion piece published by [The Invading Sea](#), a collaboration of 26 Florida news outlets focused on climate change impact.

"They are dying off in record numbers because we humans have made Florida waters inhospitable to them," Brooker said. "It's not just our manatees at risk, it's a coast-wide ecological problem."

State and federal environmental officials are beginning a manatee habitat restoration program, armed with \$8 million in state money approved this year by Florida legislators. They say with cooler winter months on the way, the tendency of manatees to congregate in warmer waters could mean many more of the creatures will starve before the restoration work is completed.

"Seagrass restoration doesn't happen overnight. We can't really start planting seagrass until we have water quality improvements," said Michael Sole, vice chairman of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. "The winter is coming."

The commission is asking state lawmakers to approve another \$7 million in the upcoming legislative session for seagrass restoration, manatee rehabilitation centers and other projects. At a committee hearing last week, McRae said researchers also are studying whether humans can feed manatees without harming them.

"Those of you that have paid attention to feeding wildlife know that

almost universally, it does more harm than good," McRae told lawmakers. But if the manatees' numbers keep plummeting, "there's a possibility some level of supplemental feeding might be in order," he said.

Manatees have struggled to withstand humans for decades. Boat strikes kill dozens of the slow-moving animals despite no-wake zones in areas the animals frequent, and many more bear lifelong scars from such encounters. There are also threats from red tide outbreaks—and unusually cold weather.



In this Thursday, April 2, 2020, file photo, a manatee comes up for air as it swims in the Stranahan River, in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. Florida is experiencing an

unprecedented die-off of manatees this year, with 959 documented deaths as of mid-October. Credit: AP Photo/Wilfredo Lee, File

They are gentle round-tailed giants, weighing as much as 1,200 pounds (550 kilograms) and living as long as 65 years or so. Manatees are Florida's official state marine mammal and are closely related to elephants.

Perhaps the best-known and oldest manatee in captivity, a male named Snooty, died at age 69, drowning after a hatch malfunctioned in his aquarium at a Bradenton museum in 2017.

Manatees were listed as endangered beginning in 1966 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a designation downgraded to the less-stringent threatened category in 2016. A new push is on to list manatees as endangered once again to increase their long-term recovery chances.

"Florida manatees desperately need us to help them by cleaning up and protecting their habitat," said Jaclyn Lopez, Florida director and senior attorney at The Center for Biological Diversity, a St. Petersburg-based nonprofit intent on saving imperiled species. The center and other groups plan to sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to boost habitat protections for the manatee.

So far, the threatened designation has remained in place. A 2017 federal-state analysis pegged the chance of manatee extinction in Florida at less than a half-percent within the next 100 years.

Yet to environmental groups, the struggle of the manatee is a signal that humans are wrecking the coastal estuaries they and many other creatures need to survive.

The state Department of Environmental Protection has set in motion a program aimed at sharply reducing the load of harmful releases into the Indian River Lagoon by 2035.

The focus is on cutting introduction of nitrogen and phosphorous that is responsible for the seagrass-killing algae blooms. Projects to date have reduced releases of these nutrients by 37% of the ultimate goal, according to the state environmental agency.

Meanwhile, efforts to rescue and rehabilitate starving manatees continue at locations such as the SeaWorld theme park in Orlando to the Tampa zoo.

The Clearwater Marine Aquarium in September announced plans for a \$10 million manatee rescue and rehabilitation facility, the fifth of its kind in Florida.

A coalition of 16 environmental and business groups called this summer for Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis to declare the manatee die-off an emergency, which could focus resources and attention on the problem. DeSantis hasn't done it, contending at a news conference it would "spook a lot of people" and possibly trigger economic harm.

"We have a lot of money at our disposal," the governor said.

Back out on the water, fishing guide and activist Fafeita said it's not just the manatees—seagrass reduction also affects other species such as blue crabs and speckled sea trout.

"You know, the list just goes on and on and on," Fafeita said. "Right now, our big concern is the manatee. We're not going to catch that many fish this year. It's affecting us some. The true impact to be next year."

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