

What resulted from feeding manatees 100 tons of lettuce? Officials ponder lessons

April 8 2022, by Kevin Spear



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

The emergency feeding and rescue of starving manatees in Central

Florida has demobilized, with authorities now wondering about lessons learned, except for one.

"A lot of these things that happened this [winter](#) put us in a much better place for the 2022-23 winter," said Teresa Calleson of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "We will continue to keep this momentum."

Wildlife authorities have not confirmed that a similar response will start again late this year for the coming winter but they have suggested repeatedly that it's likely.

Late last year, Florida and federal [wildlife authorities](#) set up a temporary base at the Florida Power & Light Co. electric plant on the Indian River south of Titusville, where manatees are lured during cold spells by the plant's discharge of warm waters.

From that base, they coordinated rescues and hand-fed manatees 200,000 pounds of lettuce. That region of the Indian River has been denuded of seagrass, the primary food for manatees, by a pollution-driven ecosystem collapse. Winter cold is often lethal for the starvation-weakened animals.

The wildlife authorities will study whether the feeding effort had a measurable impact on [manatee](#) survival and whether it altered their behavior in harmful or long-term ways.

Several authorities directly involved spoke Thursday in a debriefing for the public on their observations.

The toll for 2021 was the state's all-time record at 1,101 deaths.

Martine de Wit, a state veterinarian and scientist, said that from Dec. 1 through March 1 there were 457 manatee deaths statewide, which was

fewer than the count of 582 during the same period last year.

"But that does not mean manatees did better," de Wit said.

She said this winter was warmer than last winter that manatees may have been distributed differently during the two winters.

And in Brevard County, where the emergency feeding was done, this winter's toll was 316 and last winter's was 297, de Wit said.

The FPL plant attracted as many as 800 manatees during the coldest weather and otherwise typically served as a refuge for 100 to 300 of the animals.

Feeding them required coolers, a large staff and other equipment and measures. Jon Wallace of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said that presence has been removed from the FPL plant but can be reassembled.

"We want to be able to have people in place that can start standing things back up, start ramping up our response should the manatees require that," Wallace said.

Andy Garrett of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission said that 17 manatees stricken with starvation were rescued this winter, compared to 28 last winter.

"In addition to the rescue efforts, hundreds of dead manatees were collected from the environment by FWC law enforcement and U.S. Fish and Wildlife staff," Garrett said.

Authorities said the task of feeding [manatees](#) in the wild, which is otherwise illegal, presented them with a new challenge.

"Going into this we had no idea how it would be done and how it would work and if it would work," said Ron Mezich of the state [wildlife](#) commission. "So we learned a lot."

©2022 Orlando Sentinel.

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: What resulted from feeding manatees 100 tons of lettuce? Officials ponder lessons (2022, April 8) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-04-resulted-manatees-tons-lettuce-ponder.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.