

Manatees' starvation may be easing in Florida, authorities say

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Manatees caught in a starvation crisis in the Indian River east of Orlando may not be as stricken as a year ago, wildlife officials said Wednesday.

"We did some manatee research captures last week in Brevard and based on those animals we captured, they all looked like they were in decent body condition," said Andy Garrett, a state biologist. "We are hopeful but cautiously optimistic that maybe they turned a corner but it is a sample size of only 9 or 10 animals, so it's still yet to be seen."

State and [federal authorities](#) during the past week have restarted an emergency response of feeding lettuce to manatees at a site south of Titusville along the Indian River in Brevard County.

"Since we've been on site last week and started the operations fully on Friday, we have had about 1,000 pounds of romaine lettuce from our South Florida farms provided to the manatees," said Michelle Pasawicz of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. She added that all of that lettuce appears to have been consumed.

Last winter for the first time, a partnership of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fed 200,000 pounds of lettuce to manatees at a Florida Power & Light Co. electric plant on the Indian River.

Manatees in Brevard County's share of the Indian River have been victims of an ecosystem collapse driven by pollution and resulting in eradication of seagrass, the primary food of the marine mammals.

Many of the manatee carcasses recovered, and many of the stricken animals rescued, showed signs of advanced starvation.

Pasawicz said it is difficult to fully assess [manatee](#) conditions while they are in the water at the emergency feeding site but what could be observed was encouraging.

"On site we have not seen any compromised [animals](#) and we are hopeful

as well," Pasawicz said.

A cold front forecast for the Christmas weekend is likely to bring many manatees to the FPL plant, which discharges [warm water](#) from its generators. Despite their size, manatees are not well insulated.

During warmer months, manatees disperse widely in Florida, where they are better able to forage for [aquatic plants](#), [wildlife](#) officials say.

So far, staff at the feeding site have counted dozens of manatees at a time, but a prolonged drop in temperatures could bring hundreds if not more than a thousand manatees.

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