

Will Florida manatees be listed as an endangered species again?

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In the wake of thousands of Florida manatee deaths in recent years, federal wildlife officials announced they will launch a new scientific review to determine whether the animal should be reclassified as an

endangered species.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the coming months will round up manatee data and decide whether the West Indian manatee [species](#) should be given bolstered protections under the federal Endangered Species Act.

In 2017, [federal wildlife officials](#) downlisted manatees to a "threatened" species, a decision the agency claimed was based on improved population numbers. Many environmental advocacy groups have decried that decision as premature, especially after 1,100 animals died in 2021, many of them from a human-fueled seagrass famine.

This announcement comes after a coalition of environmental groups in November petitioned the federal agency to go back to the drawing board and reconsider classifying the species as the manatee die-off unfolded in Florida's Indian River Lagoon, a 156-mile estuary on the Atlantic coast that has been plagued by [nutrient pollution](#) in recent decades.

Pollution fueled by a cocktail of human influences through wastewater discharges, rainfall runoff laden with fertilizer and leaky septic tanks have contributed to more [algal blooms](#) in the Indian River Lagoon. Those blooms block sunlight seagrass needs to survive and thrive. Dying seagrass prompted the manatees to starve after months of emaciation and weakness.

"This finding by the Fish and Wildlife Service is a crucial step in manatees' road to recovery," said Ben Rankin, who helped write the petition while at Harvard University's Animal Law & Policy Clinic.

"Scientists have documented overwhelming threats to manatees in recent years, and it's heartening the government is taking action to respond," Rankin said in a prepared statement.

The [advocacy groups](#) who petitioned the [wildlife service](#) pointed to the widespread seagrass loss in the Indian River Lagoon, and across Florida, as a reason why the manatee should once again be considered an [endangered species](#). Between 2009 and 2021, the lagoon lost 75% of its seagrass, according to the St. Johns River Water Management District.

Declining seagrass is not unique to Florida's east coast: Tampa Bay has lost 12% of its seagrass in just the past two years, state water managers found in a survey earlier this year.

"We are pleased that the Fish and Wildlife Service recognizes the need to reevaluate its ill-timed decision to downlist the Florida manatee," said Patrick Rose, an aquatic biologist and executive director of Save the Manatee Club.

"There can be no doubt that the Service needs to immediately rebuild its manatee recovery program through increased staffing and funding," Rose said in a prepared statement.

Rose's organization in November launched the petition along with the Center for Biological Diversity, Harvard Animal Law & Policy Clinic, Miami Waterkeeper and Puerto Rican engineer Frank S. González García.

Federal [wildlife](#) officials are already revising what is considered a "critical habitat" for the manatees in Florida, or a habitat that's crucial for the recovery of a species in trouble.

According to federal law, the wildlife service has 12 months from when the petition was first filed to make its decision about reclassifying the manatee. Conservation groups expect a decision later this winter, according to Ragan Whitlock, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity.

At least 476 manatees have died statewide this year through early October, according to Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission data. That compares to 800 deaths in all of 2022 and 1,100 in 2021. Deaths so far this year have trended behind the five-year average of 650 deaths through Oct. 6.

The wildlife service assures its upcoming review will be robust.

"We are committed to ensuring we are getting the most updated scientific information during this status review to protect and recover the species," said Mike Oetker, the acting regional director for the wildlife service's Southeast region, in a prepared statement. "The Service has a long history of working to save the [manatee](#) from extinction since it was one of the first species listed under the 1967 precursor to the Endangered Species Act."

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