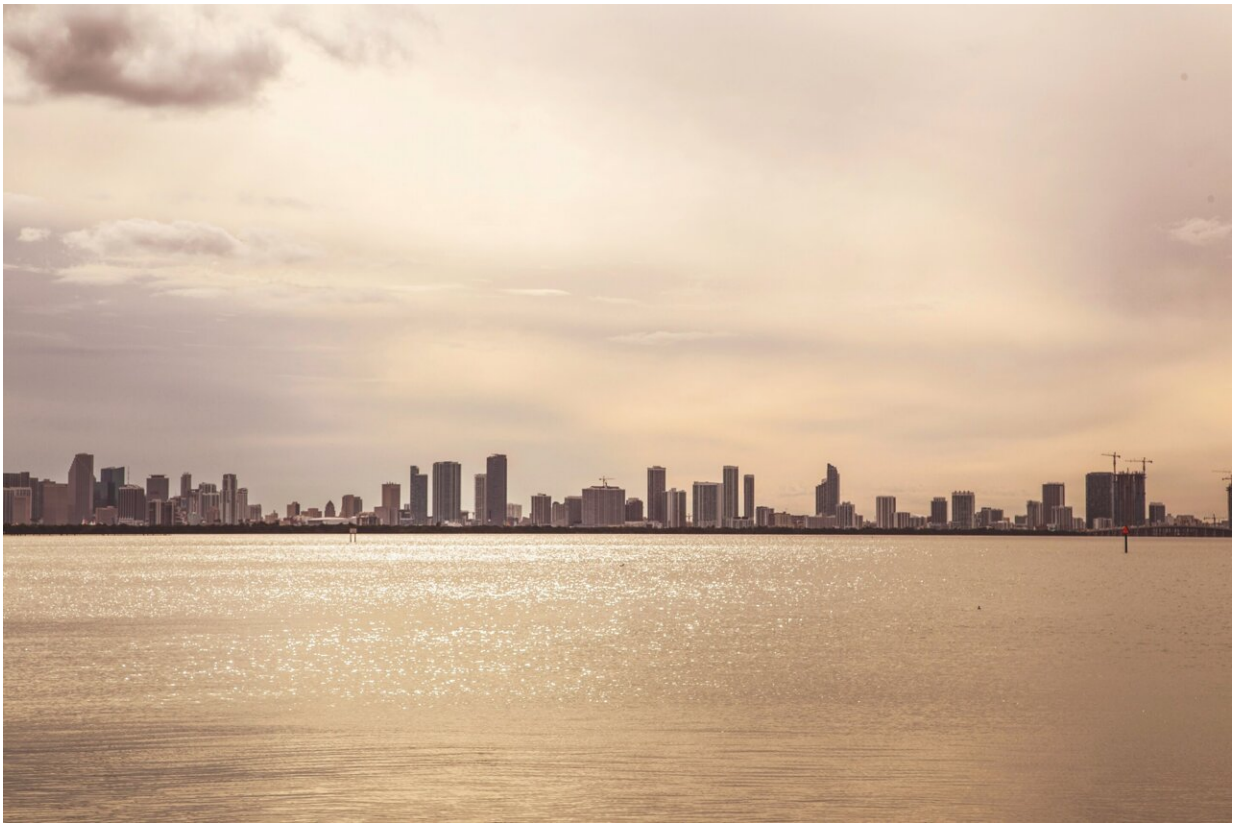


# Interior Department weighs in on Miami Wilds fight, warns critical bat habitat at risk

December 12 2023, by Douglas Hanks, Miami Herald

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Hours before a planned vote on the Miami Wilds water park, federal wildlife regulators released a letter declaring the development site "environmentally sensitive" and likely "essential" for protecting an

endangered bat.

The letter from Lawrence Williams, head of a Florida division for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, backs some of the key arguments conservation groups are making against the proposed for-profit attraction set to go up on [parking lots](#) outside Zoo Miami.

"Based on their importance to [rare species](#), it is our opinion that these parcels are environmentally sensitive," Williams wrote Maria Nardi, director of Miami-Dade's Parks department. He added the Miami Wilds parcels "will likely be considered essential for the conservation of the Florida bonneted bat."

Until now, the Biden administration has been silent on the ecological value of the 28-acre county site that once was owned by the National Parks Service and is still subject to federal oversight.

"This is completely new information," said Lauren Jonaitis, senior conservation director at the Tropical Audubon Society, one of the groups that sued to block the project on grounds it would ruin critical habitat. "It's on a silver platter: It's environmentally sensitive land."

The suit has pushed the Miami Wilds deal to the brink of unraveling, with Mayor Daniella Levine Cava reversing course on supporting the project and now saying the deal needs to be rescinded. This fall, she pointed to a victory by plaintiffs in the suit that got the federal Parks Service to concede it should have requested an environmental review before clearing the county's Miami Wilds plan.

Miami Wilds countered it was fine waiting for the review but wanted Miami-Dade to keep the deal alive until then. Legislation up for a vote Tuesday after two delays would accomplish that by extending the 2020 agreement past development deadlines Miami Wilds will miss later this

month.

While Levine Cava's administration negotiated the extension, the mayor has since said it's time for Miami-Dade to kill the deal based on the lack of Parks Service approval for the transfer.

The review would allow the Fish and Wildlife Service to review the Miami Wilds site for potential risks to endangered species like the bonneted bat. The Williams letter covers that topic, offering a preview of the kind of conclusion that's likely in the wings from the Biden administration.

In the statement, Miami Wilds said it would comply with any findings from what's known as a Section 7 review of risks to endangered species.

"Miami Wilds is committed to adhering to the results," the statement read, and will "ensure that development of the Miami Wilds water [park](#) will not jeopardize the continued existence of (endangered) species."

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