

No lettuce for Florida manatees this winter: Experts end feeding trial after two years

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For the past two winters, Florida wildlife biologists have experimented hand-feeding lettuce to hungry manatees in the Indian River Lagoon as the animals' natural food source, seagrass, was in short supply from

pollution problems.

This [winter](#), though, there won't be another feeding trial.

Wildlife experts say there are two main reasons for that decision: There's enough seagrass in the Mosquito Lagoon—where manatees linger during the colder winter months—for the population to eat this winter, according to an announcement from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

The commission also said "there are currently no indications that manatees in this region are in poor or compromised body condition" due to a [manatee](#) die-off that began in 2021. A record 1,100 animals died that year, many from starvation in a human-fueled seagrass famine.

A federally designated "Unusual Mortality Event" is still underway for manatees on the Atlantic coast, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced in October the agency is reviewing whether manatees should be reclassified as an endangered species.

The decision not to continue feeding manatees comes after state wildlife experts met with staff from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and reviewed data from the previous two winters, according to the Florida [wildlife](#) commission.

"After careful consideration, the agencies are not providing manatees with a supplemental food source at the beginning of the winter season," reads the announcement from Florida [wildlife experts](#). "However, staff developed a contingency plan for supplemental feeding which they will implement if needed."

Patrick Rose, an aquatic biologist and [executive director](#) of Save the Manatee Club, said he supports the decision to end the feeding trial, but

added the caveat that there needs to be regular, in-depth monitoring to ensure manatees in the Indian River Lagoon are keeping their health.

"There's much more vegetation available than there was at the worst part of the Unusual Mortality Event. But there's still a long ways to go for the system to be fully recovered," Rose told the Tampa Bay Times in an interview on Monday evening.

"By no means is the Mosquito Lagoon in great shape," Rose said. "But it's not at a point where it would be appropriate to continue the supplemental feeding."

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