

## Monthly Manatee UME Update

November 2022

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) response to the manatee Unusual Mortality Event (UME) on the Atlantic Coast continues via the joint Unified Command (UC) established in 2021. The UC priorities remain focused on providing enhanced response support for carcass recovery and necropsy, the UME investigation, the Manatee Rescue & Rehabilitation Partnership, and external communications.

This month we are ramping up our coordinated efforts to a winter response mode, including the reimplementation of a Temporary Field Response Station at Florida Power & Light Company's Cape Canaveral Clean Energy Center in Brevard County. The Response Station will support several ongoing UME response operations in the central Indian River Lagoon, such as manatee rescues, carcass recovery and limited field health assessments.

In approving the Response Station again this year, Service and FWC leadership also approved staff to implement another short-term, supplemental feeding trial for manatees at this site. Environmental conditions and manatee presence will guide when the trial will begin. The UC's primary goal for this limited, small-scale feeding trial is to reduce the number of animals in need of rescue, allowing the limited space in permitted critical care facilities to remain open for animals needing rehabilitation for other reasons.

The FWC re-established a temporary, emergency Manatee Protection Zone surrounding the Temporary Field Response Station to help protect manatees in that area. The No Entry Zone will protect manatees from harm and disturbance by regulating access to and operation within this designated warm-water area. The No Entry Zone will also protect manatees during response operations associated with the manatee UME.

The overarching, multifaceted UME investigation is ongoing and informed by multiple response, research and monitoring efforts. Like last year, carcass numbers decreased over the warmer months as manatees no longer experiencing the additional stressor of cold moved to areas where forage is more available. FWC researchers expect findings of chronic malnutrition in manatees to persist so long as there remains a seagrass shortage in the Indian River Lagoon.

Other health threats, like watercraft-related injuries and cold stress, remain a concern. FWC biologists respond to manatees in need of rescue and FWC law enforcement officers conduct enhanced patrols and response to the areas with the highest concentrations of manatees.

Manatees can be challenging to detect when they are underwater. Hence, operators of boats and personal watercraft need to be extra vigilant. People can help protect manatees by following these simple guidelines:

- Wear polarized sunglasses to help spot manatees.
- Avoid boating in shallow areas where manatees graze on seagrass.
- Look for a snout sticking out of the water or large circles on the water, also known as manatee footprints, indicating the presence of a manatee below.
- Observe posted manatee zones while boating.

As of mid-November, there are 80 manatees in rehabilitation at 13 critical care or rehabilitation/holding facilities: 68 in FL, two (2) in GA, nine (9) in OH, and one (1) in PR. Of this total, 15 animals are considered non-releasable. Following rehabilitation, the remaining animals will return to the wild.

We encourage people to report sick, injured or dead manatees to the FWC's Wildlife Alert Hotline at 888-404-3922 so trained experts can respond and assess the situation. People should never push a stranded marine mammal back into the water.