

Weekly Manatee UME Update

December 14, 2022

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) are ramping their Unified Command (UC) response to the manatee Unusual Mortality Event (UME) on the Atlantic Coast continues. The UC priorities focus on providing enhanced response support for carcass recovery and necropsy, the UME investigation, the Manatee Rescue & Rehabilitation Partnership (MRP), and external communications.

This week we are starting work to establish the Temporary Field Response Station for a second year at Florida Power & Light Company's Cape Canaveral Clean Energy Center in Brevard County. The Response Station supports several ongoing UME response operations in the central Indian River Lagoon, such as manatee rescues, carcass recovery, limited field health assessments, and a 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 permitted critical care facilities to have space for animals needing rehabilitation for other reasons. At the time of this writing, air and water temperatures remain relatively warm, resulting in the delay of seasonal manatee movement to warm-water sites.

At their last meeting, FWC Commissioners approved a permanent, seasonal rule restricting access to the waters surrounding the TFRS to help protect manatees and the public during response actions. The no-entry zone is in effect from November 15 through March 31, each year. It does still allow for FPL and TFRS operations, and related UC rescue, and recovery operations as needed.

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.

At the time this report was compiled, there are 77 manatees in rehabilitation at 13 critical care or rehabilitation/holding facilities: 65 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.

The Manatee Rescue and Rehabilitation Partnership released five manatees back into the wild since the last report. These manatees were rehabilitated at SeaWorld Orlando, ZooTampa and Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens. Rehabilitated at various partner facilities, the MRP also expects to return 20-24 young manatees back to the wild this winter at various warm-water sites. Warm-water releases during the winter at adult manatee congregation sites give these less experienced animals the greatest chance for success in the wild.

To date, 103 manatees have been rescued statewide in Florida in 2022.

In addition to the UME impacts, 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 in the areas with the highest concentrations of manatees.

Because manatees can be challenging to detect when they are underwater, operators of boats and personal watercraft need to be extra vigilant. This is especially important during seasonal periods when manatees are on the move to warm-water sites in winter. 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.

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.