

Weekly Manatee UME Update

January 11, 2023

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) have ramped up the Unified Command (UC) response to the manatee Unusual Mortality Event (UME) on the Atlantic Coast for the 2022-2023 winter season. The UC priorities focus on providing enhanced response support for carcass recovery and necropsy, the investigation of the UME, the Manatee Rescue & Rehabilitation Partnership (MRP), and external communications.

The Temporary Field Response Station and UC Command Center for the 2022-2023 winter season are fully operational. The Response Station and Command Center are located at Florida Power & Light Company's Cape Canaveral Energy Center (CCEC) in Brevard County. The Response Station supports several ongoing UME response operations in the central Indian River Lagoon, such as manatee rescue, carcass recovery, limited field health assessments, and a short-term, supplemental feeding trial for manatees at this site. Environmental conditions and manatee presence continue to guide the feeding trial. Since staff initiated the supplemental feeding trial at the site on December 16, manatee presence at the site has varied. To date, there have been up to 150 manatees documented in the feeding area when food is present. Beyond the Response Station,

One of the UC's primary goals 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.

The overarching, multifaceted UME investigation is ongoing and informed by multiple response, research, and monitoring efforts. So far, starvation-related mortality has been much lower this winter compared to previous years. Preliminary data indicate that, even after the extremely cold end of 2022, which was expected to cause an uptick in cases due to the extra stress on manatees in poor body condition, none of the carcasses were attributed to primary starvation last week. However, FWC researchers expect findings of chronic malnutrition in manatees to persist along the Atlantic coast so long as there remains a seagrass shortage in the Indian River Lagoon.

At the time this report was compiled, there are 81 manatees in rehabilitation at 13 critical care or rehabilitation/holding facilities: 69 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.

Two manatees were released at the Manatee Viewing Center in Apollo Beach on Jan. 10. Rehabilitated at various partner facilities, the MRP expects to return at least 20 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.

A total of 106 manatees were rescued in 2022. To date, eight manatees have been rescued in 2023.

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](tel:888-404-3922) so trained experts can respond and assess the situation. People should never push a stranded marine mammal back into the water.