

Weekly Manatee UME Update

February 8, 2023

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) continue 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. Staff initiated the current supplemental feeding trial at the site on December 16. Beyond the Response Station, the majority of local manatees have been documented in the CCEC's warm-water discharge just north of the feeding trial site.

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. 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.

Staff have implemented a permanent, seasonal No Entry Zone at the CCEC, replacing the prior temporary zone. This protection zone is important to ensure manatees are not disturbed at the warm-water refuge during this, or future winter seasons.

At the time this report was compiled, there are 95 manatees in rehabilitation at 13 critical care or rehabilitation/holding facilities: 83 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.

Manatee surveys have reached a high count of approximately 253 manatees in the feeding location and have ranged from 76-148 in the past week. At the time of this report, staff have fed over 175,000 pounds of romaine lettuce to manatees at the Response Station.

Statewide, a total of 106 manatees were rescued in 2022. To date, 27 manatees have been rescued in 2023. Four manatees have been released across Florida so far this year. Over 20 additional young manatees will be returned to the wild between now and the end of February. Winter releases at warm-water manatee aggregation sites give these less experienced animals the greatest chance for success in the wild. 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.