



CONGRESSWOMAN STEPHANIE MURPHY
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
FLORIDA, 7TH DISTRICT

March 8, 2021

The Honorable Martha Williams
Principal Deputy Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Principal Deputy Director Williams:

In light of recent reports suggesting a sharp spike in deaths among West Indian Manatees in Florida's waterways, including in the Indian River Lagoon,¹ I write to respectfully request that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) investigate this matter to determine if this event qualifies as a Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Event (UME).

As you know, pursuant to the Marine Mammal Protection Act, a UME is defined as "a stranding that is unexpected; involves a significant die-off of any marine mammal population; and demands immediate response." The Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events has developed seven criteria, any one of which can constitute a UME. They include a temporal change in morbidity or mortality, especially among species that are threatened or endangered.² If a UME is designated, it authorizes a federal investigation designed to minimize deaths, determine the cause of the event, determine the effect of the event on the population, and to identify the role of environmental parameters in the event.

The West Indian Manatee is one of Florida's environmental keystone species. The population in the southeastern United States was as small as 1,300 in the early 1990s and has grown to 6,500 due to conservation efforts. According to data from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), there were 403 manatee deaths in Florida between January 1, 2021 and February 26, 2021, over 30 percent of which occurred in the Indian River Lagoon. This is in stark contrast to the 637 manatee deaths that occurred in all of 2020 and the five-year average of 578 annual deaths that occurred between 2016 and 2020. Reports indicate that many manatees may be starving due to a decline in seagrass, their primary food source.

¹ See, e.g., Chad Gillis, "Florida manatees are dying in droves this year. Experts blame poor water quality, starvation," *USA Today* (Feb. 27, 2021), available [here](#); "Florida Manatees Starving To Death After Seagrass Disappears," *CBS Miami* (March 1, 2021), available [here](#); Jan Wesner Childs, "Florida Manatee Deaths Soar in Unusual Start to the Year," *Weather.com* (Feb. 24, 2021), available [here](#).

² See 71 FR 75234 (Dec. 14, 2006), available [here](#).

In light of the foregoing, I request that you please provide answers to the following questions:

1. Has the Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events recently declared an UME or is a declaration under consideration in connection with this event?
2. Whether or not a UME is declared, what steps can be taken by FWS or other federal agencies to mitigate the severity of this event?
3. What role can non-profit conservation groups play to mitigate the severity of this event?
4. What actions can FWS or other federal agencies take to address water quality problems in the Indian River Lagoon, which scientists believe may be causing the decline of the West Indian Manatee's food source?
5. What resources are being dedicated and what initiatives are being conducted, if any, to monitor and manage manatee populations in the southeast United States?
6. When will FWS conduct the next West Indian Manatee 5-year review?

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Stephanie Murphy
Member of Congress

cc: Leopoldo Miranda-Castro, Southeast Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Paul Doremus, Acting Administrator for Fisheries, National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration Fisheries
Melissa Tucker, Habitat and Species Conservation Director, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Peter O. Thomas, Executive Director, U.S. Marine Mammal Commission