



# United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE  
Washington D.C. 20240



In Reply Refer To:  
FWS/IR2&4/ES/076008

Peter O. Thomas, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
Marine Mammal Commission  
4340 East-West Highway, Room 700  
Bethesda, Maryland 20814-4498

Dear Dr. Thomas:

Thank you for your December 2, 2021, letter expressing the Marine Mammal Commission's (MMC) concern regarding the unusual mortality event (UME) involving the Florida manatee. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) shares these concerns. We also appreciate MMC's recommendations for a timely response and recognize the urgency that this UME demands. To that end, on November 4, 2021, the Service and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) established a Unified Command to more efficiently and effectively respond to the Manatee Mortality Incident, which includes the UME and other causes of manatee mortality. Actions taken to date include:

- Providing additional support to our invaluable Manatee Rescue, Rehabilitation, and Release Partnership (MRP) members;
- Increasing capacity to remove manatee carcasses from the Indian River Lagoon in an effort to help reduce nutrient loading;
- Implementing and assessing a limited feeding effort;
- Evaluating alternative site(s) that may be suitable for use as Pre-Release Holding Locations to free up critical care space in MRP rehab facilities—including acquisition of all necessary permits to use Welaka National Fish Hatchery for this purpose; and
- Building a joint communications framework for timely outreach.

While recognized as only stopgap measures, these actions collectively aim to reduce manatee mortality this winter and relieve the immediate burden on our response partners. We are grateful for the support we have received from partners at all levels (state, county, local, NGO, private industry, zoos, aquariums, and others) throughout the manatee's range and beyond as we together work to confront this emergency. Concurrently, the Service and FWC are also pursuing solutions to address the urgent need to expand MRP member critical care space and identify options to support ongoing operations.

The manatee mortalities along Florida's Atlantic coast are just the latest and most visible symptom of a highly impaired ecosystem. We fully recognize that long-term solutions are

required to improve water quality, seagrass abundance, and restored ecosystem health. We continue to pursue efforts with others to address these issues aggressively.

We thank the MMC for its concern and interest and welcome your assistance to find support and resources to advance these initiatives. If you have any questions or would like to discuss this matter further, please contact Mr. Leopoldo Miranda-Castro, Regional Director, South Atlantic-Gulf/Mississippi Basin Regions, at 404-679-4000 or [leopoldo\\_miranda@fws.gov](mailto:leopoldo_miranda@fws.gov).

Sincerely,

MARTHA  
WILLIAMS

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Martha Williams  
Principal Deputy Director,  
Exercising the Delegated Authority of the Director  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service