



## MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

26 April 2010

Ms. Cynthia K. Dohner  
Regional Director  
Southeast Regional Office  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
1875 Century Boulevard, N.E., Suite 400  
Atlanta, Georgia 30345

Dear Ms. Dohner:

Between 1 January and 6 April 2010 at least 469 Florida manatees died, exceeding the total number of deaths for any whole year on record (433 in 2009). At least 233 of these deaths have been attributed to exceptionally cold winter temperatures. The cause of death was not determined for another 116 manatees, and many of those animals also may have died from the cold. These deaths coincided not only with cold weather but also with the loss of a warm-water source that manatees have depended on to survive such periods. Specifically, Reliant Energy recently closed a power plant in Brevard County without taking remedial measures to protect manatees. Additional warm-water refuges may be lost if Florida Power & Light Company decides to close additional plants in Brevard County and Palm Beach County. In the past, more than 500 Florida manatees have depended on these and other power plant outfalls to survive winter cold spells. Although the most recent statewide survey counted a record high of 5,076 manatees, the deaths reported this year already approach 10 percent of that number. The loss of these animals constitutes a substantial decline in manatee abundance, and future loss of long-term sources of warm water remains a great concern.

For years, managers have known that warm-water production will cease or decline significantly as power plants are closed or their operations changed. The need for effective mitigation has been obvious, and the Marine Mammal Commission has written to the Fish and Wildlife Service on numerous occasions to emphasize that the long-term recovery and conservation of the Florida manatee depend on adequate warm-water refuges in different parts of Florida. Maintaining such refuges requires coordinated efforts by the Service and its partner agencies, non-governmental organizations, industry groups, and academia. In the past, these partnerships have been maintained and coordinated by the Florida Manatee Recovery Team and various working groups, including a warm-water task force. However, the Service disbanded the recovery team in 2007 and has not yet replaced it. Similarly, the Service has not reconvened the warm-water task force since 2007.

Unless the Service has some other mechanism to sustain warm-water sources for manatees, the Commission believes that it should reconvene the warm-water task force as soon as possible with the goal of preventing further large-scale mortality from cold weather. The Service and task force have several options, including development of artificial sources of warm water when power plants are closed or reduce their warm-water production, maintenance of currently available natural warm-water springs, and re-establishing access to other natural springs that manatees cannot use because their access is blocked. To that end, the Marine Mammal Commission recommends that the

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Fish and Wildlife Service immediately reconstitute the warm-water task force to (1) review information on recent cold-stress-related mortality (2) reexamine short-term and long-term strategies identified in the past to ensure the availability of warm-water refuges adequate to recover and support an optimum sustainable population of Florida manatees, and (3) identify steps that should be taken immediately to implement those strategies. The Marine Mammal Commission also recommends that, as soon as possible, the Fish and Wildlife Service reestablish a Florida Manatee Recovery Team composed of representatives of key agency partners. In both cases, the goal should be to work closely with concerned partners to implement short-term and long-term solutions, not simply to monitor manatee threats and trends.

Finally, the Commission requests that if the Service does not plan to reconvene the recovery team and the warm-water task force in the immediate future, then it advise the Commission as to how it plans to solve this long-standing problem.

Please contact me if you have questions regarding these recommendations and comments.

Sincerely,



Timothy J. Ragen, Ph.D.  
Executive Director