

FLORIDA PLAN DIMS PROSPECTS FOR MANATEE SURVIVAL

State Lowers Protections Despite Record Deaths and Projected Population Decline

Washington, DC - The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission is poised to downgrade the protected status of the Florida manatee despite record death totals in 2006, growing threats and an absence of new protective measures, according to comments filed today by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER). Today is the last day for public comments before FWC finalizes what would be the state's first draft manatee management plan.

"Our current strategy in Iraq has a better chance of succeeding than this manatee plan," stated Florida PEER Director Jerry Phillips, a former enforcement attorney with the state Department of Environmental Protection. "This so-called 'recovery' plan is premised on false assumptions, propelled by unrealistic hopes, and chock full of bureaucratic double-talk."

Although it is projecting a 30 to 50% decline in manatee population over the next 60 years, the state plan lays out no concrete steps to combat what it admits are growing threats, including:

- ✍ **More Propeller Deaths and Maiming:** "In addition to the expected increase in boat numbers, there are other factors that may act synergistically to increase the risk of fatal collisions between manatees and watercraft."
- ✍ **Worsening Habitat Destruction:** Losses "of warm-water refuges over the next several decades present one of the most serious long-term threats to manatees in Florida."
- ✍ **Red Tides and Harmful Algal Blooms:** "Red tide represents a major natural source of mortality for manatees in the southwestern region that is beyond the control of managers."

The potency of these threats appears to be reflected by a record 416 manatee deaths in 2006, following a near-record 396 deaths in 2005. Nonetheless, the Commission's recovery plan fails to offer any coherent strategy or specific steps (apart from additional research) to prevent the manatee populations from suffering continuing losses. The plan:

- ✍ Eschews any tighter speed limits, despite the current chaotic county-by-county speed policies that hinder consistent protections;
- ✍ Undermines enforcement by urging warnings to violators rather than fines, even in egregious cases; and
- ✍ Weakens harassment protections by advocating that law enforcement must show that the harm caused to the animal was intentional or the result of negligence.

The plan proposes a goal of 2,500 manatees but does not explain why this level provides a safety net for long-term survival. In addition, FWCC admits that it needs far more reliable means of monitoring population changes, so that quick intervention is even possible.

"The Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission might as well change its name to the Boating and Marina Board," added Phillips, pointing out that recreational and construction interests have been most opposed to manatee protections. "The state should be ashamed of itself for going forward with this pseudo plan while record numbers of manatees are dying each year."