

# Stephanie Murphy Calls on FWS to Investigate Rising Number of Manatee Deaths –

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If what the experts say is true, [that the manatees are starving to death](#) because our water districts have given our water away to business and industry instead of taking care of it as the law requires, then....

Then words do not suffice. Then it is way past time to make some fundamental adjustments.

Then when will it stop? When will the people throw out those who allow this?

Maybe when they have killed the last manatee.

Read the entire article here [at Florida Daily](#).

*Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.*

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*– A river is like a life: once taken,  
it cannot be brought back © Jim Tatum*

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## **Stephanie Murphy Calls on FWS to Investigate Rising Number of Manatee Deaths**

By [FLORIDA DAILY](#)

03.14.21



U.S. Rep. Stephanie Murphy, D-Fla., sent a letter to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) requesting the federal agency investigate the sharp increase in Florida manatee deaths in the Indian River Lagoon and other Florida waterways.

Between January 1 and February 26 of this year, the state recorded 403 manatee deaths, about triple the normal level. According to recent reports, manatees may be starving due to a decline in seagrass, their primary food source.

“The spike in manatee deaths is of great concern to many Floridians,” said Murphy last week. “I’ve asked federal government experts to swiftly examine what is occurring, if human actions are contributing, and to take any and all appropriate actions to help address the problem.”

In her letter to FWS, Murphy asked the agency to determine whether these manatee deaths constitute a Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Event (UME). Under federal law, 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 developed seven criteria, any one of which can constitute a UME. If a UME is designated, it authorizes a federal investigation designed to minimize deaths, to determine the cause of the event, to determine the effect of the event on the population, and to identify the role of environmental parameters in the event.

In her letter to FWS, Murphy asked the agency to respond to a series of questions, including whether a UME was designated or was under consideration; what steps FWS or other federal agencies could take to mitigate the severity of this event; what role non-profit conservation groups could play to mitigate the severity of this event; what actions FWS or other federal agencies could take to address water quality problems in the Indian River Lagoon, which may cause a decline in manatees’ food source; and what resources were being dedicated to monitor and manage manatee populations in the southeast United States.

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. For information on Florida manatee mortality rates, [click here](#).

The full text of Murphy’s letter to FWS is below.

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, 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. 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.

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

- 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?

- 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?
- What role can non-profit conservation groups play to mitigate the severity of this event?
- 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 food source?
- What resources are being dedicated and what initiatives are being conducted, if any, to monitor and manage manatee populations in the southeast United States?
- When will FWS conduct the next West Indian Manatee 5-year review?

Thank you for your attention to this matter.