

# News Release



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## U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Broadens Florida Manatee Protections in Kings Bay

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today an emergency rulemaking to expand federal protection areas for manatees in Citrus County, Florida, creating a refuge that includes all of Kings Bay in Crystal River. The manatee refuge goes into effect November 15, 2010, and includes all waters of Kings Bay, including all tributaries and adjoining water bodies upstream of the confluence of Kings Bay and Crystal River.

Established under the emergency rule provision of the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), the Kings Bay manatee refuge provides the Service with management options to immediately address the needs of the increasing number of manatees using the warm water springs in Kings Bay. These new provisions will provide greater access for manatees to critical warm water areas during the winter months and address public concerns associated with local, wintertime manatee viewing activities.

“The Kings Bay federal manatee refuge designation expands vital access for manatees to warm water habitat during the coldest months of the year, while clarifying what swimmers and others cannot do when in the presence of manatees,” said Dave Hankla, Service’s North Florida field supervisor.

The Kings Bay manatee refuge joins an existing federal manatee protection network of 11 sanctuaries and 13 refuges. Manatee sanctuaries – where all waterborne activities are prohibited – already exist in

Kings Bay, and this emergency rule will not change those existing sanctuaries. The existing manatee sanctuaries are now too small to adequately protect Kings Bay's manatees and expansion is necessary to create a larger area, where manatees can rest, free from disturbance.

The new refuge will overlap the existing manatee sanctuaries in King's Bay and will provide managers the ability to establish, as needed, additional "no-entry" areas with boundaries posted to accommodate manatee use during the winter.

Under the Endangered Species Act and the MMPA, the Service can establish manatee protection areas on an emergency basis when the agency determines there is substantial evidence that there is imminent danger of a taking of one or more manatees, and that such establishment is necessary to prevent such a taking. Take is generally defined as the harassment, harm, death or injury of a listed species, along with a variety of other harmful actions. Manatee protection areas can be either manatee sanctuaries or manatee refuges.

Manatee viewing guidelines, many of which have been in place for several years, have been incorporated into the rule. As prohibited acts, these will now be legally enforceable by federal and state marine law enforcement officers. Activities that are specifically prohibited throughout the manatee refuge include:

- Chasing or pursuing manatee(s).
- Disturbing or touching resting or feeding manatee(s).
- Diving from the surface onto resting or feeding manatee(s).
- Cornering or surrounding or attempting to corner or surround manatee(s).
- Riding, holding, grabbing, or pinching or attempting to ride, hold, grab, or pinch manatee(s).
- Poking, prodding, or stabbing, or attempting to poke, prod, or stab manatee(s) with anything, including hands and feet.
- Standing on or attempting to stand on manatee(s).
- Separating a mother and calf or attempting to separate a mother and calf.
- Separating manatee(s) from a group or attempting to separate manatee(s) from a group.

- Giving manatee(s) anything to eat or drink or attempting to give manatee(s) anything to eat or drink.
- Actively initiating contact with belted and/or tagged manatee(s) and associated gear, including any belts, harnesses, tracking devices, and antennae.
- In addition to the above prohibited activities, the following waterborne activities are prohibited within Three Sisters Springs, from November 15 to March 15: scuba diving and fishing, including with hook and line, by cast net, or spear.

“Manatee viewing is an important wildlife education opportunity for the public,” said Michael Lusk, the Service’s Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge manager. “We believe these measures can provide an additional level of protection for manatees in Kings Bay, while at the same time providing a way to view manatees in a manner beneficial to both the animals and the public.”

The emergency designation lasts for 120 days. In accordance with the Endangered Species Act and federal regulations, the Service will commence proceedings, which will include opportunity for public review and comment, to consider establishing the manatee refuge permanently within 10 days after the emergency designation is published.

The Service has scheduled two (2) public informational meetings in Crystal River to discuss the emergency rule. These informal public meetings afford the Citrus County community and other interested parties an opportunity to hear information and ask questions about the emergency refuge rule, why the Service took this action and what is next in the process. Times and the location of these meetings are included below:

**Emergency Rule Informational Meetings:**

- Tuesday, November 16, 2010, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m.
- Thursday, November 18, 2010, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m.

**Note:** Both meetings will be held at the Plantation Inn and Golf Resort, 9301 W. Fort Island Trail, Crystal River, FL 34429

The Service has also scheduled two (2) informal public meetings, which will be held after the emergency rule informational meetings to discuss the process of formally establishing the manatee refuge in Kings Bay. These non-decision making, informal public meetings provide an opportunity for information exchange and offer the Citrus County community and other interested parties the chance to get information and ask questions about the next steps in the more formal rulemaking process, as well as provide the Service information that may be useful in the process of formally establishing this manatee protection area. Times and the location of these meetings are included below:

**Informal Public Meetings:**

- Saturday, November 20, 2010, 1:00 to 4:00 p.m.
- Thursday, December 2, 2010, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m.

**Note:** Both meetings will be held at the Plantation Inn and Golf Resort, 9301 W. Fort Island Trail, Crystal River, FL 34429

For more information about the manatee and this rule, please visit the Service at <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/> or <http://www.fws.gov/northflorida/>.

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