

NWX-DOI-FISH & WILDLIFE

Moderator: Charles Underwood
March 30, 2017
3:00 pm ET

Coordinator: Once again, welcome and thank you for standing by. At this time all participants are in a listen only mode until the question and answer session of today's call.

At that time if you'd like to ask a question, you may press Star 1. Today's conference is being recorded. If you have any objections, please disconnect at this time.

I would now like to turn the conference over to Mr. Charles Underwood. You may begin. Thank you.

Charles Underwood: Good afternoon, everyone. I'm so happy that you could join us today. I am Charles Underwood with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services North Florida office in Jacksonville, Florida and I will serve as the facilitator for today's teleconference.

This afternoon's press teleconference is regarding the services decision to upgrade the status of the West Indian Manatee from endangered to threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

First some basic ground rules before we get started. This afternoon's conference is being conducted in an operated moderated question and answer fashion. When you dialed in to today's call, the operator collected your name and affiliation and then placed you in listen-only mode. You were also given instructions on how to notify the operator that you have a question during the Q&A portion of today's call.

All parties except our panel will remain in listen-only mode and each reporter who notifies the operator will be given an opportunity to ask one question and a single directly related follow-up question. If you have other questions, please hold those until we go round robin style to give other folks the chance to ask their question. We can come back to you.

We will then move onto the next reporter and continue until there are no additional questions. One final comment, while there are other at service actions currently taking place such as probate reviews, I would ask that questions be limited to those relating only to today's federal decision on the West Indian Manatee reclassification. I am happy to take questions on our other actions following this press conference and can be reached at (904) 731-3332.

I would like now to introduce our panel and give its senior member an opportunity to make brief opening remarks. We will then open the line for questions. Our panel includes Mr. Larry Williams, last name is spelled whiskey, India, Lima, Lima, India, alpha, Mike, sierra. Larry is the services ecological services program manager for Florida.

Mr. Jay Harrington. Last name is spelled hotel, echo, Romeo, Romeo, India, November, gulf, tango, Oscar, November. Jay is the services Florida

supervisor in its North Florida ecological services office located in Jacksonville, Florida. Jay's office is the lead for the Florida manatee recovery.

We also have Mr. Edwin Muniz. Last name is spelled Mike, uniform, November, India, Zulu. Edwin is the services field supervisor in its Caribbean ecological services offices located in Puerto Rico. Edwin's office is the lead for the Antillean manatee recovery.

We also have Mr. Jim Valade, last name is spelled Victor, alpha, Lima, alpha, delta, echo. Jim is the services Florida manatee recovery lead biologist in our North Florida ES office and one of two primary co-authors on the day's final decision.

Lastly we have Mr. Jan Zegara. First name is spelled Juliet, alpha, November. Last name is spelled Zulu, echo, gulf, alpha, Romeo, alpha. John is the services Antillean manatee recovery lead biologist in our Caribbean ES office and the other primary co-author of the day's decision.

At this time, I will give Mr. Williams an opportunity to give brief opening remarks. Larry?

Larry Williams: Thank you, Chuck. Hello, everyone. We are really excited to formally announce that Endangered Species Act milestone with the recovery of the West India manatee. As a result of long-term ongoing efforts by a range of public and private partners, the fortunes of the West India manatee are turning around.

So today we are formally announcing the services final decision to reclassify manatees from endangered to threatened. In other words, we are updating their status from endangered to threatened. The official notice of this action

will be available on the Fish and Wildlife Service web pages later this afternoon and it will publish in the Federal register next week.

Our decision on this center on a core point which is the species best fit the endangered species act definition of endangered, that is in imminent danger of extinction or does it fit the definition of threatened. Could it become endangered in the foreseeable future? While the species is not out of the woods yet, it is no longer on the brink of extinction and as such, we have reclassified the species from endangered to threatened.

We base today's decision on the best available information which was solicited from many sources as part of an open and transparent process. The changes in the fortunes of manatees are a direct result of the collaborative efforts of the state of Florida, the commonwealth of Puerto Rico, other countries, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services and public and private organizations.

Listing the manatee under the Endangered Species Act has drawn national and international attention to the plight of this charismatic animal. It helped direct needed dollars towards its recovery and it has also put programs in place that protect manatees from ongoing threats.

We share the concerns voiced by many stakeholders, peer reviewers and others that risk remain for both subspecies of manatee, particularly the Antillean manatee and we fully recognize that much work remains to be done.

The Department of Interior and the Service remain committed to addressing the remaining threats to the species throughout its range including the loss of one water habitat in the United States, watercraft collisions and we are committed to assisting other countries in their manatee conservation efforts.

With today's announcement, it is critical that everyone understands that the existing Endangered Species Act protections will remain in place. The protections under the status of threatened are no different than the protections under the status of endangered. That means that manatee protection areas, speed zones and other conservation measures remain in place under this new classification. Nothing has changed in that respect and as such public recognition and voluntary compliance continue to be a priority.

Today's decision also reflects the belief that the endangered species act when implemented in partnership with all stakeholders can provide for the protection and recovery of America's most at risk wildlife and the habitats they depend on and it can do all of this while balancing the needs of business and the economy. This is truly a success story. Thank you.

Charles Underwood: Thank you, Larry and for - the websites, the information will be available later in the day will be www.f.s.gov/southeast as well as www.fws.gov/northflorida, that's north Florida all one word. Okay. We have concluded are brief remarks and our opening ground rules. Again, just a reminder that this is a Q&A session. It's moderated. You would press star 1 if you need to ask a question and the operator will now be ready to take questions.

Coordinator: Thank you, sir. Yes. Pressing Star 1 will put you into queue. You will be prompted to record your first and last name and called on at your turn. Should you decide to withdrawal a request for a question, you can press Star 2. Please give your parties a moment to queue up.

We have a question from Craig Pittman of Tampa Bay Times. I'm sorry. He queued up and his line is on music. Mr. Pittman?

Craig Pittman: Yes.

Coordinator: Your line is open for your questions, sir.

Craig Pittman: Thank you.

Coordinator: Mm-hm.

Craig Pittman: How does this work legally. In other words, under the Endangered Species Act, don't you first have to make a finding that the threats that originally put this species on the endangered list have been ameliorated in some way?

Charles Underwood: Jay, do you want to try to answer that question?

Jay Harrington: Well, first thing that we're pointing out here that the threats, you know, that landed it on the list, while they have been reduced, you know, and there's a number of speed zones and the like, you know, protections put in place, the - every threat that a species has not been eliminated and I think we've made that pretty clear, you know, from the start, they've been reduced by the manatee is no longer on the brink of extinction. It's no longer an imminent, you know, reality. It, you know, we still do believe that, you know, it could become, you know, endangered in the foreseeable future if we don't continue to, you know, manage the threats. Does that answer your question?

Craig Pittman: Kind of. Is this based on computer modeling that you guys were doing?

Charles Underwood: This is Chuck Underwood. I'm going to go ahead and jump in right quick.

Craig Pittman: Okay.

Charles Underwood: A couple of things. First off, no. The West Indian Manatee is what we have petitioned to review and reclassify.

Craig Pittman: Ah-huh.

Charles Underwood: So, yes, the model was considered as part of that data set that was reviewed but it was not the only thing that made it - that fed into the final decision. The other thing is when the ESA first came out and species were put on the list, the five factor analysis and things that we have to do now, didn't really exist in its current form. So the threat analysis and all of that was slightly different. We now have a much more aggressive review of all the data when they make a decision.

Craig Pittman: Okay. I'm sorry, who was the first person who answered me? I didn't catch the name.

Charles Underwood: Jay Harrington.

Craig Pittman: Jay Harrington. Okay. Thank you.

Coordinator: Next we have a question from Keith Baker. New 13 Orlando. Your line is open, sir.

Keith Baker: Thank you very much. What I'm interested in is finding if the public is going to see any changes in the protection efforts. In other words, any migration as far as boaters or anyone who is, you know, monitoring them, will they see any significant changes or does this pretty much keep the same level of protection in place.

Charles Underwood: Larry, do you want to go ahead and answer that one?

Larry Williams: Sure. The answer, Keith, is the same level of protection is in place. We expect no change in speed zones, in the enforcement of speed zones, no change in the manatee protection areas that are already established throughout the state. No changes in any of those things.

Keith Baker: Good because I can tell you there was a little bit of a sigh in the newsroom when this came around because there's a feeling that somehow or another this would alter the vulnerability of manatee and so, you know, what can we tell the public other than what you've said that pretty much it's going to be the same from a standard of a viewer or an onlooker that kind of thing, correct?

Larry Williams: Correct. And a couple of things to add to that, like I said in that opening statement, the protections that the species has under the status of threatened are identical to the protections they have under the status of endangered. Those are two categories within the Endangered Species Act and both categories have equal protection.

In addition to that, manatees are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which is a separate law from the endangered species. So for those two reasons, the protections of the Endangered Species Act stay in place and the Marine Mammal Protection Act has always protected manatees and will continue to do so. For those reasons, people should not expect any changes in the protections.

Jay Harrington: Keith, this is Jay Harrington here. Another thing I would point out too is while, you know, we have the Marine Mammal Protection Act and we have the Endangered Species Act and those protections aren't going to be lessened, the other thing I would say is one, that - those protections are what have led us

to a place of where we believe that it can be reclassified. The other thing is that if we identify areas where additional protections are needed, they will be added as well.

Keith Baker: Do you know of any of the areas that are kind of sensitive in that regard? I mean you hearing anything where - recently we've had some concerns, I believe, on the Indian River and Banana River, some of those places that have raised issues partly due to the water quality content but also just in general with boaters and such so are you aware of anything say in central Florida that might be particularly of interest?

Jay Harrington: I would say not at this time.

Keith Baker: Okay. That's all I have. Thank you.

Coordinator: If anyone else would like to queue up, please press Star 1 at this time and record your name. I will announce you into the conference. So far we have no one queuing up.

Charles Underwood: Well, if we have no other questions, we can go ahead and ...

Coordinator: Sorry. One more just came up.

Charles Underwood: Okay.

Coordinator: Thank you. Craig Pittman, Tampa Bay Times.

Craig Pittman: The - is this an action you guys would have taken if you had not been sued by the Pacific Legal Foundation?

Jay Harrington: Craig, I'll answer that. This is Jay Harrington. I would say eventually we would have. It was identified in the five year review in 2007 but if you recall we went through a lot of sequestration and those kind of things so, you know, my answer to that would be eventually we would have gotten to that.

Craig Pittman: Mm-hm. I only ask because obviously a lot has happened since 2007. I mean, you know, they had the rather large die offs and so forth and an expanding human population of course as well. So that's why I wondered if you were still basing it on that 2007 or if you got a new report or anything like that that you've been using.

Jay Harrington: No. We considered all of those things. We considered the die offs and, you know, every other thing. We didn't just leave it back in 2007. We considered everything since then.

Craig Pittman: Okay.

Jay Harrington: And, Craig, this is Larry. Something relevant to the 2007 timeline. Since then, the Florida manatee population has continued to increase. You know, we see that in the surveys that are done every winter and in the model that the population model that the U.S. Geologic Survey has helped us do, those die off events in the Indian River lagoon and the ride tide events of the West Coast, the model shows that those events do not cause the population to start to decline.

You know, we - they're bad events and we hate to see them but the population continues to increase despite those events so, you know, for what it's worth, the model shows that they're not that significant.

- Craig Pitman: So you did get an updated model because I know when you guys were first talking about this, the model did not include those die offs yet. I think Dr. Runge was planning to include them in a new iteration of it.
- Jay Harrington: You know, Jim? If you're on, can you still go ahead and could you address that a little bit how we got that information?
- Jim Valade: Yes, Craig, this is Jim Valade.
- Craig Pittman: Hi, Jim.
- Jim Valade: We have a - hi. We had a presentation, sort of an update on the status of the modeling efforts late last fall that we considered, you know, in this final rule. The Exfil report is expected to be published pretty much any day now. Mike Burns and his co-authors, I think that report will be coming out within a day or two.
- Craig Pittman: Okay. Yes, I'd like to see that. And do you know if he included the expanding human population in this one or the loss of habitat? Because those were also missing from his previous iterations from it.
- Jim Valade: Yes. I haven't obviously seen the report. We just got, you know, some significant updates, you know, late last year and to the best of my knowledge, that wasn't something that we discussed then.
- Craig Pittman: Okay. Okay. One last question. The state usually copies what you guys do on endangered species. Have you had any discussions about them also taking manatees off the state endangered list and putting them as threatened?

Charles Underwood: This is Chuck. Your find - they'll find out at the same time you'll find out what our decision is.

Craig Pittman: Okay.

Charles Underwood: They were very much aware and we will work with them closely in terms of data they might have to offer us as part of that review process but in terms of our decision, that decision is based upon the endangered species act and the requirements we have under there and so the state is now learning of our decision at the same time you folks are.

Craig Pittman: Okay. All right. Thanks very much. I appreciate it.

Coordinator: We have a question from Bruce Ritchie, Political Florida.

Bruce Ritchie: Hi. That's Politico Florida. The question is there's always sort of a debate over whether there are too many manatee speed zones in place, are they too restrictive and there's been various discussion about reexamining those. What's going to happen with this reclassification? You say the existing protections will remain in place but what does that mean at the level of speed zones? Does it mean everything gets frozen in time? Does it mean that there don't need to be new ones or does it mean we can get rid of some of them that are out there?

Jay Harrington: Probably say - this is Jay Harrington. Those speed zones are actually under constant review. There's - you know, how many 13 counties, I believe it is that have manatee protection plans and there's a part of those that, you know, when they come up for renewals, those speed zones are a matter being looked at as well and, you know, you want to make sure that it's - you got them in the places where they really need to be.

Bruce Ritchie: So does this classification review effect that review at all?

Jay Harrington: No. It's - like we said in the beginning, the protections under as threatened are the same as they are as endangered. So the protections don't change at all there and, you know, and they're also protected by the marine mammal protection act. So, you know, the legal requirements, you know, that protect manatees don't go away with a change in classification.

Charles Underwood: And this is Chuck and I'm going to add to that that the Federal protection areas are put in place both the areas where we control speeds and the - mostly seasonal sanctuaries, we control activity during the winter time. Those are put in place under both the ESA and the MMPA. So those do not change and we could do additional ones and folks if they have data that support it, could come into us and ask us to reconsider if the data support their position.

Bruce Ritchie: Thank you.

Coordinator: At this time, we have no one else queued up. It is Star 1 and record your name if you would still like to queue up.

Charles Underwood: Well, if we have no other questions, then I want to thank everybody for being on the call and look forward to seeing your stories when they come out. Thank you again and everyone appreciate your participation. Operator, we'll conclude the call at this time.

Coordinator: Yes. This will conclude today's conference. Thank you for your participation. All parties may disconnect at this time.

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