

Three Sisters Springs Q & A 20141212

1. Why are you making this proposal now?

We believe implementing the proposed interim measures in this plan will help increase protections to manatees in light of the projected increased visitation for this winter season. The number of snorkelers and boaters visiting the Three Sisters Springs has practically doubled from 67,000 permitted visitors in 2010 to more than 125,000 in 2013. With the trend of increasing human and manatee usage inside the Three Sisters Springs, there is also a need to evaluate human and manatee interactions in this limited and specific assessment area to better inform management actions in the future. Recommendations for changes to manage human and manatee interactions only will apply to the three spring heads located at Three Sisters Springs.

2. Why only a 14-day comment period, and not a 30-day period?

We are proposing to put these interim actions in place as quickly as possible to protect manatees using the warm waters found at Three Sisters Springs to avoid potentially lethal colder temperatures in open waters during the winter months. . It has taken the Service longer than expected to develop the document. There has already been significant public input into proposed management from previous public meetings. We have considered hundreds of suggestions from the public from previous meetings. For example, comments from a Public Workshop held on July 11, 2013 can be found at: <http://www.fws.gov/crystalriver/2013-711CrystalRiverNWRPublicWorkshopFlipchart.pdf>

3. How will this protect manatees?

This is a temporary measure that outlines steps to prevent potential crowding, while also outlining ways we can learn more to get better, more precise data to base future decisions upon. The Service needs to get a better handle on the total numbers of visitors each day and hour, numbers of people within the proposed sanctuary zones, swimmers effects on manatees, etc., so we can make better decisions in the future.

4. Will this alter dive operator's business by restricting hours?

Allowing swimmers to visit from only 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. may require operators to visit other parts of Kings Bay to conduct their business. These interim management measures will protect manatees while still allowing public access. Kayaks, canoes and large inflatables will be prohibited.

5. Why is the Service prohibiting kayaks and canoes from entering Three Sisters Springs?

Paddlers observing manatees from non-motorized vessels inside the springs may unintentionally disturb manatees due to reflection of glare on surface water restricting

paddlers' ability to see breathing or resting manatees on the surface or surfacing to breathe, which often results in unintentional collisions with manatees. Due to the limited size of the springs (1 and 1/2 acres), maneuvering non-motorized vessels is a challenge, particularly if lobe closures are in effect. Paddlers accidentally paddling over top of resting manatees have been documented causing unintentional disturbance even when trying to avoid colliding with surfacing manatees and/or swimmers. Some paddlers wade into the spring pulling their vessels behind them, which also causes disturbance of manatees. In 2011, volunteers documented over 150 non-motorized vessels inside the springs during a one-hour period (Public Use Survey on 03/13/2011), reaching 203 vessels within a two-hour period (1:30 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.). The high numbers of paddlers also raises safety concerns for swimmers. There are groups of guided paddlers of up to 30 vessels at one time that visit the 1 and 1/2 acre Three Sisters Springs each week. These large groups of paddlers are known to unintentionally disturb manatees by causing shifting and displacement of resting animals. When these many paddlers are inside the springs they cover too much of a surface area over resting manatees unintentionally making contact with manatees with their paddles or simply hovering over them blocking them from reaching the surface to breathe. There are additional viewing options beside kayaks and canoes by using the fully developed boardwalk at Three Sisters Springs.

6. How does this relate to the Pacific Legal Foundation petition received by the Service to reclassify the manatee?

The Pacific Legal Foundation's petition to reclassify the West Indian manatee under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is an independent process unrelated to the Refuge's proposed management actions for Three Sisters Springs.

7. The Service received three separate petitions from Sierra Club, Center for Biological Diversity, and the Save the Manatee Club asking to increase protections in Kings Bay to prevent the take of manatees. Is this action a response to these three petitions?

We recognized the need to take additional action in this area prior to receiving the petitions and were already developing recommendations to protect manatees. As shared earlier, the Service held workshops in 2013 and has been collaborating with the public to find better ways to protect manatees. This plan is not our formal response to these petitions. We encourage all partners working together on manatee issues to share comments and recommendations.

8. Does this help reduce conflicts in Three Sisters Springs?

Reducing visiting hours to between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m., in addition to the other recommended measures, would be proactive, precautionary actions designed to avert disturbance of resting manatees. Eliminating kayak and boats inside the Three Sisters Springs will also help reduce conflicts.

9. What will this cost? Who pays?

The Service recognizes the proposed action will affect local businesses that bring visitors to Three Sisters Springs. Based on contingent value studies conducted in the past, the public's willingness to pay for manatee protection is significant and there is public support for manatee protection measures, such as those described in this alternative. Because of this, the Service believes anticipated, improved wildlife viewing opportunities will likely have an overall, positive, economic effect. In terms of actual costs, Crystal River NWR anticipates, at a minimum, an increase in staff capacity costs, which will be borne by the refuge.

10. What is the next step?

The Service will continue to evaluate the effectiveness of these actions over the winter. Managers will incorporate improvements or make other changes in a public process within its Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Refuge during 2015 – 2016.

The Service will consider and evaluate comments from the public on this proposal and share final decisions as soon as possible. We will then continue to evaluate how the measures are working.