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## NEWS RELEASE



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### **Service Releases Access Plans for Three Sisters Springs for the Upcoming Winter Season**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has established updated, science-based protocols to help determine when Three Sisters Springs is open for in-water wildlife viewing this winter.

“Our goal is to be fully transparent on how we make day-to-day decisions for in-water public access to Three Sisters Springs this winter,” said Joyce Palmer, the new Project Leader for the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge Complex. “We know that cold weather and high tides increase the likelihood of higher numbers of manatees inside the springs, but other factors will also be considered to ensure manatees are not disturbed.” “We also will take into account manatee distribution, behavior, and water visibility when we determine if Three Sisters Springs will be open to visitor in-water access,” said Palmer.

These variables are represented in two separate protocol flowcharts:

- (1) Flowchart of predictable environmental and biological factors (e.g., manatee population dynamics associated with weather and tides); and,
- (2) Flowchart of unpredictable environmental and biological factors (e.g. water clarity, specific manatee behaviors, and manatee distribution inside the springs).

In addition to implementing the two protocol flowcharts, the refuge staff will continue last year’s measures from the 2014-2015 Three Sisters Springs Environmental Assessment, which include: the closure of the western and eastern spring lobes, restriction of paddlecraft access, and the requirement for commercial special use permit holders to guide/escort their visitors into the springs. The Service also will increase the refuge staff’s presence at the springs during the winter and will continue to conduct additional research at the springs.

These protocol measures are only for Three Sisters Springs and not for the other Kings Bay springs that are open to the public. Other areas open to visitors where manatees gather in Kings Bay are not under any new protocols, restrictions or new regulations.

The measures will be used at Three Sisters Springs throughout this season until the latest Environmental Assessment is finalized. That Assessment is likely to be implemented during the 2017-2018 manatee season.

The full set of protocols and guidelines that the Service will use to determine opening and closing of the Three Sisters Springs are available at the homepage of the refuge’s website: [www.fws.gov/crystalriver](http://www.fws.gov/crystalriver).

“These protocols are not based on any specific formula or a specific manatee number in the springs. Rather, the protocols are based on avoiding and preventing any potential manatee disturbance,” said Palmer.

The day-to-day springs' management protocols will require a trained uniformed, refuge staff member to survey the conditions at Three Sisters Springs. The staff member will then recommend to the manager to close or reopen the spring run to public access on a daily basis.

Fortunately, when the springs are closed to in-water visitor access, the boardwalk will still be open to provide everyone an excellent opportunity to see these wonderful animals in their natural habitat.

“The best time to enjoy this phenomenal aggregation of manatees in the springs is during high tide on cold days,” said Palmer. “Most manatees come to the springs to rest, but boardwalk visitors can also witness manatees cavorting, milling about, and even mating,” added Palmer. For more information on the visitor experience at the Three Sisters Springs boardwalk, please visit: [www.threesistersspringsvisitor.org](http://www.threesistersspringsvisitor.org)

## Background

Three Sisters Springs is a small, confined buffered spring basin less than one acre in size. The springs' shallow waters and multiple spring vents discharge millions of gallons of water per day, which provide essential wintering habitat to hundreds of Florida manatees. Over the past three years, more than 500 manatees have been inside these springs at one time during cold days. More than 100,000 visitors snorkel at Three Sisters Springs each winter to witness the extraordinary connection between the manatees and these crystal clear springs.

However, some of these encounters may have resulted in unintentional manatee disturbance. By identifying and anticipating the circumstances that lead to manatee disturbance inside Three Sisters Springs, the Service has adopted these new management protocols to improve the protection of the wintering manatees in Three Sisters Springs.

Over the past three years, with the recent increase in both the numbers of manatees and visitors to this small spring basin, management has been challenging, prompting several winter research projects on the manatee behavior and usage of the springs. Those research projects have provided the Service some of the answers needed to manage Three Sisters Springs more efficiently for manatees and for visitors during the winter months. Between the winters of 2014 and 2016, the Service has conducted manatee population and ethology studies at Three Sisters Springs in correlation to several environmental factors that will be used as “general predictors” of manatee activity at Three Sisters Springs.

Daily updates of Three Sisters Springs' closures and openings will be available in the refuge's website: [www.fws.gov/crystalriver](http://www.fws.gov/crystalriver), under icon: “Important Information,” which prompts viewers to the refuge's Facebook page. A Facebook account isn't needed to view the updates on this Facebook link. For those wanting to link directly to the Facebook page without going through the website, please visit: [www.facebook.com/crystalrivercomplex](http://www.facebook.com/crystalrivercomplex)

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