FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
DATE: November 21, 2017
Contact: Joyce Palmer 352-436-7156

Service Releases Access Plan for Three Sisters Springs for the Upcoming Winter Season Based on Gulf Temperature

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has refined the science-based protocol used to determine when Three Sisters Springs is open for in-water wildlife viewing this winter.

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Sirenia Project has been tracking manatees in the Crystal River/Kings Bay area since 2006 with floating Global Positioning System (GPS) satellite-monitored telemetry tags, and most of these animals have visited the warm waters within Three Sisters Springs multiple times to maintain their body temperature during the cold winter months. Analysis of movements of these tagged manatees combined with environmental information such as water temperature and level in the Gulf, Crystal and Salt Rivers and local springs provides valuable insight into their habitat use patterns relative to measurable ambient conditions.

“Our goal is to protect warm water habitat at Three Sisters Springs for manatees when they need to be there to survive,” said Joyce Palmer, the Project Leader for the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge (CRNWR) Complex. Manatees showed the expected pattern of more occurrences in the springs when Gulf temperatures were relatively cold (i.e., less than 20 °C). A detailed look at manatee GPS locations revealed that when Gulf water temperatures at Shell Island were colder than 17 °C, manatee habitat use patterns shift from the Gulf to higher occurrences in Three Sisters Springs and the adjacent springs known as Idiot’s Delight. Thus, the Service will close Three Sisters Springs to human activity when Gulf temperatures at Shell Island drop to 17 °C and the springs will remain closed until temperatures rise above 17 °C for 24 hours or longer. Real time Gulf temperatures at Shell Island will be monitored regularly and are available at: https://waterdata.usgs.gov/fl/nwis/uv/?site_no=285531082412600&PARAmeter_cd=00065,00060.

Implementation of measures from the 2015 Environmental Assessment on Manatee Wildlife Viewing on CRNWR Three Sisters Springs, which includes 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 will continue this year.
The U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report that the Service used to determine opening and closing of the Three Sisters Springs is available at the homepage of the refuge’s website: www.fws.gov/crystalriver.

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 see large numbers 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 may 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.

Daily updates of Three Sisters Springs’ closures and openings will be available in the refuge’s website: 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.

###

*The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.*