

regulations and the federal Endangered Species Act, while minimizing social and economic impacts to the boating community and related marine industries.

D. Purpose and Goal

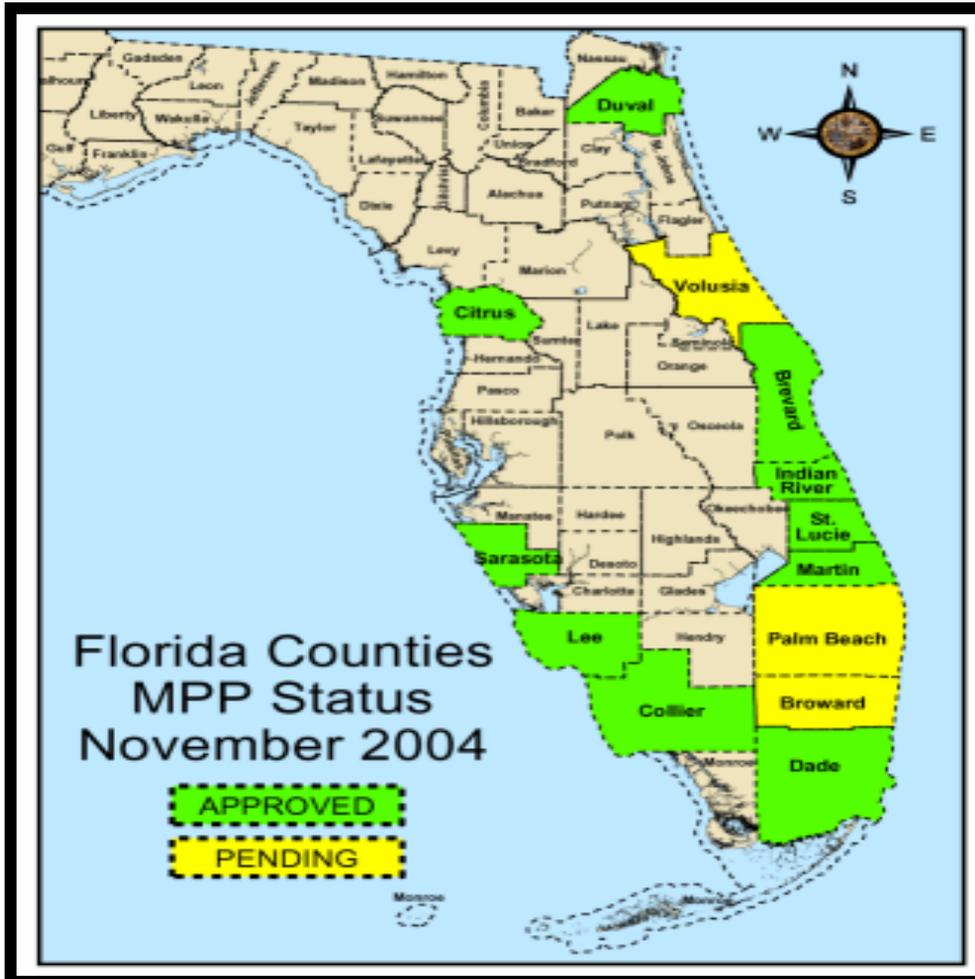
Due to a variety of factors, including relatively low population numbers, low reproductive rates, a geographically restricted range, and comparatively high levels of human-related mortality, the Florida manatee is particularly vulnerable to extinction. Subsequent to its designation as an endangered species, numerous programs have formed in order to protect manatees and their habitat. The Florida Manatee Recovery Team, an interagency group of manatee experts, developed the first Florida Manatee Recovery Plan, which was approved by FWS in 1980. It was updated in 1989, in 1996 and again in 2001. The Plan is presently being reviewed again in order to keep it up-to-date with the results of ongoing research, which provides valuable information related to the survival of the species. One of the recommendations in the federal Recovery Plan is to “develop site-specific manatee plans at a local level.” The Recovery Plan ranks this as a priority goal, essential for the recovery of the species in the wild.

In 1989, the Florida Governor and Cabinet directed the 13 “key” counties that had the highest number of watercraft-related manatee mortalities, to develop Manatee Protection Plans. Most of the counties on Florida’s east coast were designated as ‘key counties’, however, due to the comparatively low number of watercraft-related manatee mortalities, St. Johns County **was not** designated as one of the key counties.

During the early years after the Governor’s 1989 directive, the focus by county governments was on the development of county-specific vessel speed zones which are one component of an MPP. Speed Zones have now been adopted by all 13 key counties, and in some cases, these speed zones have also been revised and updated.

With legislatively approved funding, FWC also provided financial assistance to several counties where plans had not been adopted. As further incentive for several counties to complete development of their MPPs, in the late 1990s the Governor and Cabinet, sitting as the Board of Trustees of the Internal Improvement Trust Fund, indicated their intent to deny use of state-owned submerged lands for boating infrastructure projects in key counties that did not have approved manatee protection plans or which were not making significant progress toward that goal. Several counties which had not completed their MPPs by that time were moved to resume development of their MPPs, and with the assistance of FWC staff, full manatee protection plans have been developed and approved for ten of the 13 counties, and progress is being made in the development of several other county-specific MPPs (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Florida Counties MPP Status – November 2004



Source: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Aug, 2005

The purposes of St. Johns County’s MPP are to: 1) summarize what is known about the historic and current local populations of manatees and to: 2) provide and describe actions that St. Johns County could consider undertaking if human-related watercraft manatee mortality were to increase to levels that are unacceptable. To achieve this goal, the following tasks have been undertaken:

1. Data pertaining to manatee distribution, abundance, and mortality in local waterways have been obtained and analyzed. This work has included reviewing and assessing existing information pertaining to natural resources, human activity, and other factors that potentially affect the health and well-being of manatees and their habitat.
2. Local, state, and federal programs that benefit manatees have been identified and described. Additionally, recommendations have been formulated to develop new and/or improve existing programs to better protect manatees and their habitat in St. Johns County.

3. The County's Comprehensive Plan has been reviewed to identify any component that either has potential benefits to manatee or which is potentially at odds with manatee protection
4. A process flow chart and schedule have been developed to guide the implementation of the MPP.

As discussed later in this plan, no cause of death could be determined for the majority of manatee deaths in St. Johns County. The FWC's Florida Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) is the lead agency in performing necropsies to determine the cause of death for manatees, and they are constantly refining their techniques in order to reduce the percentage of manatees to which no cause of death can be determined.

Boating impacts, however, are the largest source of human-related manatee mortality. Consequently, the siting of new boating facilities and expansion of existing boating facilities is a critical component of manatee protection, and a Boat Facility Siting Plan (BFSP) is a requirement for all state-approved Manatee Protection Plans. Although development of a BFSP is not a within the scope of the current work effort, in 2002 St. Johns County commissioned a "Water Dependent Uses and Marine Study", the results of which have been used in the development of this MPP.

As part of its strategy to develop appropriate conservation measures for manatees, the FWS delineated areas throughout Florida based on the relative risk of watercraft-related manatee mortality in those areas (FWS, 2001). FWS defined high risk areas as those averaging one or more watercraft-related manatee mortalities per year during the past ten years. Medium risk areas averaged less than one, but more than zero, watercraft-related manatee mortalities per year. Low risk areas (e.g., inland counties and counties with little manatee usage) had no documented watercraft-related mortality.

St. Johns County is currently designated by the FWS as a 'medium risk' county. It is recommended that the County's goal be to implement this MPP in order to maintain the county's designation as medium risk and prevent being re-designated as 'high risk'.