

MANATEE PROTECTION PLAN

A description of the historic and current presence, abundance and protection of West Indian Manatees and a plan to promote their continued existence in St. Johns County, Florida

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Located on Florida's northeast coast, St. Johns County consists of a varied mosaic of urban lands, agricultural lands, parks, preserves and waterways. The area is widely recognized for the opportunities available to boaters. In the eastern portions of the county, there is the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway (AICW), the Matanzas and Tolomato Rivers and further east, the Atlantic Ocean. The western boundary of the County is the northward-flowing St. Johns River, which extends approximately 310 miles from its headwaters in central Indian River County to its confluence with the Atlantic Ocean near Jacksonville. Residents and visitors share these waters with varying numbers of the Florida manatee (*Trichechus manatus latirostris*). St. Johns County and the municipalities located within the County have developed and adopted Comprehensive Plans and land development regulations that are intended to allow growth while providing protection for native flora and fauna.

In 2000, the Board of County Commissioners of St. Johns County's agreed to develop a Manatee Protection Plan and to adopt provisions of the Plan into the Land Development Code, which includes elements concerning coastal protection, conservation and open space. Since before 1989, when then-governor Lawton Chiles demanded that 13 'key' counties with the highest records of watercraft-related manatee mortality develop Manatee Protection Plans, the state and federal wildlife agencies have been tracking manatee mortality and working on ways to reduce all aspects of human-related mortality. The Board of County Commissioners of St. Johns County took a voluntary step forward in the protection of manatees when they commissioned and ultimately adopted a Water Dependent Uses and Marine Study, which took into account the history of manatee mortality.

This Manatee Protection Plan (MPP or "Plan") identifies that the economic value of the marine industries is over \$213 million annually in St. Johns County (G.E.C. 2005), and then identifies and describes manatee habitat within the county. Aerial censuses and radio tracking of manatees indicate that they are present in three major areas: 1) the nearshore Atlantic Ocean; 2) the Intracoastal Waterway and the tidal rivers through which it extends; and 3) the St. Johns River. To varying extents, manatees also use the freshwater and tidal creeks, channels and tributaries that connect to these waterways. Although manatee abundance in St. Johns County is difficult to estimate, manatees have been documented to be present in the county throughout the year. Blue Springs in Volusia County is a major wintertime attractant for manatees, which have been documented to use the St. Johns River as a major corridor for movement.

During the period since record-keeping began in 1974 through 2004, there have been 65 documented manatee deaths in St. Johns County, and manatee mortality has varied from zero to eight deaths per year. Although the State of Florida attempts to recover and determine the cause of death of all manatees, often the decayed condition prevents identification of a definitive cause of death. The causes of manatee death in St. Johns County during this period include: undetermined (51%), watercraft (17%), cold stress (12%), other natural (11%), and perinatal (9%). The MPP identifies actions that are being taken and/or could be taken in order to protect manatee habitat and minimize human-related manatee injury and death.

The Plan recognizes that historically, watercraft-related manatee mortality in St. Johns County has been comparatively low, but that manatee deaths by this cause have increased in recent years. In other counties where watercraft-related manatee mortality is (or has been) unacceptably high, the state and/or federal wildlife agencies have found the need to develop boat speed restriction zones. There is presently one manatee-related speed restriction zone in St. Johns County, and it is a goal of this plan to prevent the need for additional boat speed restriction zones to be established on waterways in St. Johns County for the purposes of manatee protection. Although no individual sites show repeated instances of watercraft manatee mortality, it is recommended that County staff meet with wildlife agency personnel to discuss specific issues regarding manatee protection in a several-mile stretch of the Tolomato River in St. Johns and Duval Counties. Repeated instances of watercraft-related manatee mortality suggest that measures are needed to reduce the likelihood of additional manatee deaths in this area.

The MPP also includes a description of the agencies that are involved with enforcement of marine regulations. An important element of increasing compliance is elevating the knowledge and awareness of boat operators. In this regard, the Plan identifies opportunities through which the County could work collaboratively with the NE Florida Sea Grant staff; the Guana, Tolomato, Mantanzas National Estuary Research Reserve; or others, to develop educational materials that can be available and/or distributed to the owners of vessels that are registered in the County.

The Plan requests that the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission recognize that there is a lack of scientific data concerning the use of some specific areas of the County by manatees, and recommends that the State work with St. Johns County to obtain additional information in these areas.

The MPP also includes a recommended schedule for Plan implementation.

The goal is that adoption and implementation of this MPP will allow St. Johns County to maintain its designation by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as 'medium-risk' to manatees.