



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER SERVICES
COMMISSIONER NICOLE "NIKKI" FRIED

THE CAPITOL

October 4, 2021

The Honorable Martha Williams
Principal Deputy Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Principal Deputy Director Williams:

As Florida's Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services and an independently elected member of the Florida Cabinet, I write to you today regarding the alarming die off of the West Indian manatee, which are native to our state, and to strongly encourage the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to take action expeditiously to reclassify these marine mammals as endangered species given the urgency that this situation demands.

As you're aware, in March 2017, FWS downgraded the status of the West Indian manatee from endangered to threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act. This action was taken despite the presence of scientific evidence that showed that the downlisting was not warranted, and widespread objections from wildlife and environmental organizations along with Florida's bipartisan Congressional delegation.

Prior to this misguided decision, the manatee had been listed as endangered since 1967 due to risks posed from the degradation of its habitat, the growing impact of climate change, pollution, speeding boats, seagrass loss, and declining water quality – all of which still pose serious threats to their survival. These continued risks have unfortunately been realized, particularly as it pertains to seagrass loss and declining water quality, which have been widely attributed to the record number of manatee deaths being reported in Florida. According to Florida's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, there have been 957 manatee deaths so far this year. This is more than double the amount of annual deaths that happened prior to the delisting decision. Even more alarming is that by FWS' own estimates there are only around 6,500 West Indian manatees remaining in the southeastern United States.

While we appreciate the current protections afforded the manatee and the FWS' ongoing 5-year mandatory of the manatee's status, the troubling report last week from FWS that more than 20 species should be declared extinct is a sad reminder of the consequences of inaction and delayed action. There are few things more quintessentially Florida than the manatee, which is why it is absolutely vital that every step to protect these treasured creatures is taken immediately, restoring its status as an endangered species.

Thank you for your consideration of this urgent request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "nicole fried".

Nicole Fried
Commissioner of Agriculture