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Local environmentalists fight for manatees to be added to endangered list



BY CASEY ALBRITTON

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"It's incredibly heartbreaking to see this iconic species just whither away, whither to death for the lack of seagrass forage and food," said Eagan Whitlock with the Center for Biological Diversity

Whitlock is talking about manatees.

"Over the last two years we've been under an unusual mortality event. We've lost nearly 2,000 manatees in 2021 and 2022 combined," said Whitlock.

Dr. Dave Tomasko with the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program says a big reason for the manatee deaths is unpredicted environmental events.

"Our problems are related to humans making red tide worse. Think of Tampa Bay in 2021 when you had Piney Point and you had in the middle and upper part of Tampa Bay the worst red tide in 50 years," said Dr. Tomasko.

Dr. Tomasko says the Piney Point incident, in which millions of gallons of contaminated water leaked into the Gulf of Mexico, pollution, heavy rain, and the use of fertilizer has caused sea grass to start disappearing.

"Over the last decade we've lost 150 square miles of seagrass in the state of Florida," said Dr. Tomasko.

Now the Center for Biological Diversity filed a petition with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to upgrade manatees to endangered, and the organization expects to hear back this week.

"It would invoke new funding opportunities to protect water quality and sea grasses. It would allow more full time employees at the agencies to be dedicated to manatee recovery



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