

Announcement of proposed manatee protection zones delayed for third time

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced a third delay Friday in the release of a list of proposed manatee protection zones around Florida. The list is required by a settlement of a federal lawsuit a coalition of environmental groups filed in January 2000 alleging that agencies weren't doing enough to protect endangered sea cows from getting killed or injured by boats.

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April 2 was the original deadline for the list, but the Fish and Wildlife Service and the plaintiffs in the lawsuit agreed to extend the deadline to May 2, then to July 2 and now to Aug. 3.

Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman Chuck Underwood said Friday the delay will enable the federal agency to coordinate its protection zones with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Underwood said the Fish and Wildlife Service wants to give the state agency "plenty of leeway" to establish its own zones before the federal agency jumps in.

"These critters are not in dire straits so we thought we could give (the state) more time," Underwood said. That state agency agreed to a settlement of a separate lawsuit with the same environmental coalition in April.

Boating rights advocates led by Naples-based Standing Watch have filed an administrative challenge of new zones proposed in Brevard County as a result of the settlement. A hearing date is set for Aug. 13. The federal settlement requires the Fish and Wildlife Service to designate areas where boats would be restricted and other areas where boats wouldn't be allowed in order to protect manatees.

Standing Watch President Jim Kalvin applauded the federal delay, saying tighter restrictions aren't needed anyway.

"I think it's a good thing," he said. A representative of the environmental coalition said Friday that coordination is a good thing but that the groups aren't willing to let the Fish and Wildlife Service renege on the settlement.

"Coordination, not capitulation — that's the bottom line," said Cynthia Frisch, Florida representative of the Pegasus Foundation, an animal welfare group.