

Manatee habitat update put on back burner

By [Craig Pittman](#), Times Staff Writer

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Federal wildlife officials announced Tuesday that they really do need to update their maps showing critical habitat for the endangered manatee so that development in those areas gets increased scrutiny from regulators.

But they won't. Agency officials said they are too busy with work that has a higher priority.

"Thus, the regulated public will see negligible change in how we conduct business," Dave Hankla, the field supervisor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Jacksonville office, said in a news release.

Manatees have been listed as endangered since 1967. Eleven years later, the agency mapped out what was then considered the manatee's critical habitat around the state.

Critical habitat shows the areas the species needs most for eating, breeding and living. The agency is supposed to scrutinize any development there to make sure it won't jeopardize manatees' future.

The agency hasn't updated the maps for more than three decades. Nor does the designation say what should be done to preserve the habitat. Meanwhile, thanks to waterfront development and other factors, the areas where manatees swim have changed considerably.

So in December 2008, the Save the Manatee Club, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Wildlife Advocacy Project and the Defenders of Wildlife petitioned for Fish and Wildlife to draw new maps and set guidelines for reviewing development plans in key habitat.

One of the areas they targeted as needing to be included in the new critical-habitat maps: the Tampa Bay area.

The decision by the agency to take no action is disappointing, especially because 2009 was the deadliest year on record for manatees, said Miyoko Sakashita of the Center for Biological Diversity.

"Manatees could wait indefinitely for the needed protections. Meanwhile, their habitat could be destroyed," she said.

This is the second time in two months that federal officials have declined to take any action on a study regarding manatees. According to a study the agency released in December, only seven manatees could be killed by humans each year without pushing the species toward extinction. Ninety-seven were killed by boats last year.

But because the report was concerned only with commercial fishing, which has little effect on manatees, the agency found no reason to crack down on speeding boaters or deny more permits for dock construction.