

Save the manatee

It is distressing to learn that the boating and marine industries are mounting new assaults on manatee-protection measures so soon after an agreement on speed limits was ratified.

It was just more than one year ago that the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission approved a detailed boat-regulation plan that was in accord with Manatee County's own manatee-protection ordinance, ending a three-year fight over boat speed zones to protect slow-moving manatees from collisions with boats. We had assumed all parties were satisfied with the terms, as all made compromises to avoid costly litigation.

Knight Ridder reports that the anti-manatee effort is being pushed by industry lobbyists in Tallahassee in an attempt to roll back some of the gains made by manatee-protection advocates. Those efforts range from easing restrictions on boat dock permitting to attacking boat speed limits to downgrading the manatee's status from "endangered" to "threatened" or "species of special concern." The latter would require action at the federal level, but that could well occur in the anti-environmental climate of Washington.

Indeed, just 10 days ago the House passed legislation that environmentalists say would gut the Endangered Species Act. If approved by the Senate, it would eliminate crucial protections for wildlife habitat and allow the secretary of the interior, a political appointee in an administration that is increasingly hostile to the environment, to override scientific findings in conflicts over endangered animals.

This effort comes at a time when the manatee faces the added stress of a lingering red tide outbreak. Several of the big sea cows, along with a distressing number of dolphins, sea turtles and fish, have washed up on area beaches in recent months, presumed victims of the toxic algae. Boating advocates say it's foolish to force boat owners to slow down to protect manatees when red tide poses a far greater threat. We would argue the opposite point: all the more reason to prevent fatal collisions with manatees. There is not much we can do to prevent deaths due to red tide at this point; not enough is known about the plague. But there is something we can do about another threat to manatees: slow down on the water and stop trying to gut manatee-protection rules.