

[Draft regulation could help prevent manatee deaths in Florida waters \(news-press.com\)](https://www.news-press.com/story/news/environment/2022/01/11/draft-regulation-could-help-prevent-manatee-deaths-in-florida-waters/7000000002/)

Nearly 600 manatees died in Florida waters this year; draft rules could help deaths

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Newly written draft language for proposed boater safety legislation may help protect threatened manatees from being killed by boat strikes.

This year, 593 manatees were found dead in Florida. Of those, an estimated 90 died after boat strikes, according to preliminary data from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. That means 15 percent died from boat-related injuries. But that percentage could be higher.

Due to “pandemic-related limitations,” nearly 200 of the total reported deaths were not investigated, so no cause of death was given, according to the agency's preliminary 2020 manatee mortality data.

Overall, total deaths were slightly higher this year compared to 2019's 564 reported deaths.

The FWC this year sent the state a draft proposal that would require anyone operating a vessel to possess a boating safety identification card issued by FWC.

Current regulations state that only people born on or after Jan. 1, 1988, must successfully complete a boater safety course. The proposed legislation that would require every boat operator to possess the boater safety ID card would begin Jan. 1, 2023.

Boat strikes killed 15 manatees in Brevard, the county with the highest boat-related mortality rate in the state. On the Treasure Coast, comprising Indian River, Martin and St. Lucie counties, 10 manatees in total were reported killed by boat strikes.

In Southwest Florida, eight manatees were reported killed by a boat strike with seven occurring in Lee County and the other in Collier.

Sarah Gledhill, with the non-profit endangered species organization Center for Biological Diversity, said that while the proposed safety regulation is in response to the lack of education resulting in accidents and fatalities, manatees will benefit.

“When you look at the leading causes of manatee fatalities, one of which is boat strikes, this is a natural, common-sense measure that we can take to help reduce manatee deaths,” she said.

She said right now it’s as if people have a free license to operate a very powerful machine in the waterways without knowing proper navigation, ways to read channels, safety hazards and different wildlife areas.

“There’s a lot of recreation on our waterways, and we share our waterways with wildlife,” she said. “If we educate everybody who is operating this powerful machine, it not only helps us reduce conflicts between humans, but helps reduce conflicts between manatees, sea turtles and other wildlife.”

Manatees, also known as sea cows, are herbivores that can grow more than 13 feet long and weigh over 3,500 pounds.

FWC issues public information notices asking boaters to slow down and watch out for manatees.

“Manatees can be difficult to detect when underwater, so it is important for operators of boats and personal watercrafts to be vigilant while out on the water,” a March news release from the agency says.

This year, the coronavirus disrupted the workflow for biologists at FWC. Due to pandemic limitations, FWC said there was a period where scientists were prevented from conducting death investigations.

Gledhill said it's likely the percentage of manatee deaths from boat strikes could be higher.

Earlier in December, a veterinarian with FWC's Marine Mammal Pathology Lab in St. Petersburg, Martine de Wit, told Florida Today that a growing manatee population meant demand for necropsies – autopsies on animals – was in growing demand and it was “not sustainable to necropsy them all.”

Only eight biologists in her lab performed necropsies and she is the only one to sign off on each examination, De Wit told Florida Today.

Last year, when the agency was able to operate without the limitations of a global pandemic, 23% of manatee deaths statewide were due to boat strikes. The five-year average since 2015 is 20%.

The proposed boater safety regulation is a win-win for everybody, including wildlife, Gledhill said.

“This isn't about infringing on anyone's rights but about how we can coexist with wildlife while recreating on Florida's waters,” she said. “Because Florida is the nation's boating capital, we hope this is a priority to keep us recreating and protect wildlife on the waterways.”