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*Managing fish and wildlife
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September 18, 2007

Mr. Carlos Espinosa, P.E., Director
Miami-Dade Department of Environmental
Resources Management
701 NW 1st Court, 4th Floor
Miami, FL 33136-3912

Subject: Miami-Dade Manatee Protection Plan

Dear Mr. Espinosa:

I received your letter dated September 5, 2007 regarding possible revisions to your existing county Manatee Protection Plan (MPP). Your letter indicates you wish to revisit your plan due to the anticipated change in the manatee's listing status and the anticipated demand for boating access.

First, I would like to update you on recent developments in our process to reclassify the manatee from the endangered category to the threatened category. At our recent Commission meeting on September 12, the consideration of reclassifying the manatee was deferred to a later date at the request of the Governor. This means that the draft state Manatee Management Plan was not approved, and it is uncertain when this issue will come back before our commission. In addition, if approved, the proposed change in the listing category will not reduce protections for manatees. Regardless of the manatee's status designation, the intent of the management plan is to uphold existing protections. It is imperative that adequate protections remain, so that current gains in the population can be maintained to prevent the population from declining into endangered status in the future.

Based on our experience with implementing the state-approved Miami-Dade County MPP, the existing protections provided by the plan appear to be successfully addressing risks to manatees. As you have noted, revision to the Miami-Dade MPP has not been identified as a priority in the draft state management plan. We consider your MPP one of the best plans available because it appears to provide adequate conservation measures that are also easy to interpret and implement.

However, since we believe that the plan will need to be reassessed eventually, we would like to address your question concerning the steps required to initiate a revision to your plan. The first step in this process would require the collection of more recent data; otherwise there is no objective analysis that can be done to address any changes that may have occurred since the plan was initially approved.

Fortunately, Miami-Dade County has been proactive in the collection of manatee data through the on-going aerial survey monitoring effort. We are aware that you have continued to fly manatee aerial surveys at least seasonally, and would only suggest that you collect a few more surveys in the next 12 months.

We also believe that a new boat study would be helpful to evaluate any changes that have occurred since the last study was conducted, in 1991. At the very least, we recommend collecting basic boat distribution aerial survey data similar to the study for Broward County. Such a study would take a year to conduct in order to include seasonal variations, with an estimated typical cost of \$50,000-\$70,000. In addition, the marina inventory with associated occupancy rates should be updated. These studies will be particularly helpful in addressing potential boat access issues. As part of the reassessment of the plan, it would be helpful to outline the exact nature of the boat access issues and concerns as indicated in your letter.

Once the data mentioned above is collected, the next step in the revision process that we recommend is that your staff, my staff, and the staff of USFWS analyze the information and draft the initial revisions to your plan (assuming revisions are needed). We have found that the most productive, cost-effective and expeditious method for developing MPPs is for the initial draft to be produced at an agency staff level. Public comment on this initial draft should then be initiated as deemed appropriate by the County, such as initiating an advisory committee or stakeholder groups to address local concerns. Unless you anticipate that the County will be recommending changes to the manatee protection speed zones, no local advisory committee is required by FWC or USFWS.

The involvement of the USFWS is important for any revisions to an existing MPP. It can significantly affect the proposed protective measures as their requirements for protection must also be met. Coordinating with the USFWS is relatively easy since it is usually accomplished concurrently with the state assistance and guidance that is provided to counties while revisions are being drafted.

We realize that most counties are looking at budget cuts and must be judicious in any expenditure that is undertaken. We appreciate the opportunity to provide early guidance in revising your MPP, since we believe that our recommendations in this letter are the most cost-effective and efficient method for revising MPPs. We also appreciate your invitation to participate in the upcoming public meetings, however, our program is also experiencing budget shortfalls and travel opportunities may be reduced. If you decide to move forward with revisions to your plan at this time, it will be difficult for us to provide much assistance to you. Please keep us advised of any meetings, however, and we will try to attend as budgetary and time restraints allow.

Mr. Carlos Espinosa

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If you decide to follow our recommendations in this letter, please let my staff know if you would like additional details on our suggestions for moving forward. Please do not hesitate to call me, Ms. Carol Knox or Ms. Mary Duncan of my staff at (850) 922-4330 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. Kipp Frohlich". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and "F".

R. Kipp Frohlich, Section Leader
Imperiled Species Management Section

RKF/mpd

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cc: Kalani Cairns, USFWS