



March 12, 2026

Jerry Campbell, Chairman
Board of County Commissioners
Hernando County, FL

RE: Seasonal closure request for manatees within Hospital Hole, Weeki Wachee River

Dear Mr. Campbell,

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) staff have reviewed your letter (received February 11, 2026) regarding manatee protections within Hospital Hole. We appreciate the Hernando County Board of Commissioners' concerns for manatees and the request for conservation measures on the Weeki Wachee River. Based on the content and the specific request for a Manatee Protection Zone in your letter, FWC staff provides the following response to what we recognize as a petition to initiate rulemaking.

The establishment of a seasonal "no-entry" zone for the protection of manatees falls under the authority of FWC, pursuant to the Florida Manatee Sanctuary Act in section 379.2431(2), Florida Statutes. The rulemaking process involves several steps, starting with an evaluation of existing data, the collection of new data if needed and a comprehensive evaluation of this information to determine if there is a need for rule development. When best available scientific data supports the need for a new or amended rule, FWC staff will move forward with rulemaking, pursuant to the Administrative Procedures Act in Chapter 120, Florida Statutes, the Manatee Sanctuary Act, and the Uniform Rules of Procedure related to rule making in Chapter 28-103, Florida Administrative Code. Once the Manatee Protection Zone rulemaking process is initiated, it may take 12-18 months to complete rulemaking.

FWC staff denies your petition to initiate rulemaking because we do not have sufficient information to fulfil the request of this petition at this time. However, staff acknowledge the unique characteristics of Hospital Hole and have also identified this site for consideration in future rulemaking efforts within this region. FWC staff are currently working closely with Hernando County staff and local partners on data collection efforts and monitoring at this site for future assessments to inform potential rulemaking decisions. As we progress towards an agency proposal, we will collaborate with Hernando County early in our process to discuss shared conservation objectives.

FWC staff appreciates the County's dedication to manatee protection and conservation and are available to provide technical assistance on opportunities for outreach and education to increase awareness among recreational users of the Weeki Wachee River and Hospital Hole. We look forward to continuing to work with the County on data collection and on any future rulemaking efforts within the County. If you have any questions or comments, please contact Ashley LaVere at (850) 922-4330 or via email at Ashley.LaVere@MyFWC.com.

Sincerely,

Ron Mezich, Section Lead
Imperiled Species Management Section

Cc: Maria Merrill, FWC
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Ashley LaVere, FWC
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