



Save the Manatee® Club

The Voice For Manatees Since 1981

September 15, 2026

The Honorable Harriet Hageman, Chair
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries
House Natural Resources Committee

The Honorable Val Hoyle, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries
House Natural Resources Committee

Save the Manatee Club's Statement of Opposition: H.R. 9017

Dear Chair Hageman and Ranking Member Hoyle,

Save the Manatee Club ("SMC") opposes H.R. 9017 and respectfully urges the Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries to withdraw this bill from consideration at the Subcommittee's Legislative Hearing scheduled for September 16, 2026. This bill would undermine the Endangered Species Act ("ESA") and increase risks to Florida manatees and their habitat. We are concerned this bill will cause long-term, irreversible, and serious harm to Florida's environment, economy, and way of life.

Established in 1981 by former Florida governor Bob Graham and singer-songwriter Jimmy Buffett, SMC is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to safeguarding manatees and preserving their habitat. Widely beloved by Floridians and our millions of yearly visitors, the manatee is the Florida state marine mammal, a major driver of tourism, and a strong example of success for the United States' and Florida's wildlife protection laws. However, recent challenges faced by this species — such as the tragic 2020-2022 Unusual Mortality Event, which claimed the lives of over 1,200 manatees largely due to starvation from pollution-driven seagrass loss — highlight why robust water quality protections are needed now more than ever. Allowing unsustainable development projects that will affect manatees' sensitive habitat to move forward without essential ESA review runs counter to this urgent need for improved protections.

Wetlands in Florida provide critical ecosystem services such as flood protection, water quality improvement, and vital habitat for diverse wildlife — particularly manatees, which require stable water quality in their aquatic habitats to survive — and people alike. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service ("FWS") estimates that wetlands provide ecosystem service benefits valued at over \$7.7 trillion annually within the conterminous United

States.¹ Wetlands remain vulnerable to many threats including human development, weather shifts, and invasive species, which ruin wetlands by destroying their delicate water balance and fragile soils. Florida contains more wetland acreage than any other state in the U.S. In sum, maintaining protections is essential.

H.R. 9017 stands to override a valid court opinion² and legislatively rubber-stamp ESA compliance for Florida's assumption of Clean Water Act Section 404 ("Section 404") permitting. Besides improperly bypassing the law and a legitimate path forward, this bill stands to materially harm Florida manatees and their sensitive aquatic habitats. For one, the bill stands to "streamline" permitting in a manner that will, in effect, bypass necessary federal protections. The bill allows a flawed programmatic biological opinion ("BiOp") issued by the FWS to satisfy permit approval, bypassing any additional review. Bypassing essential reviews allows unsustainable development projects to be fast-tracked without a full evaluation of how construction runoff, dredging, and increased boat traffic will destroy sensitive wetland habitats.

Additionally, and of major concern, the bill eliminates consultation under Section 7(a) of the ESA for Section 404 projects, substituting a lesser "technical assistance process." Eliminating this step removes a vital legal safety check that ensures federal agencies protect endangered species. Practically, this will leave manatees vulnerable to projects that could permanently jeopardize their survival. This will, almost certainly, result in increased pollution, toxic algal blooms, and the destruction of the seagrass beds that manatees and a diverse number of other species rely on to survive.

For the reasons stated herein, Save the Manatee Club urges the committee to withdraw H.R. 9017 from consideration at the September 16, 2026 hearing. Preserving federal oversight of ESA permitting is essential to safeguard Florida manatees and their habitat.

Respectfully,

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¹ Lang, M.W., Ingebritsen, J.C., Griffin, R.K. 2024. Status and Trends of Wetlands in the Conterminous United States 2009 to 2019. U.S. Department of the Interior; Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, D.C. 43 pp. *available at*, https://www.fws.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2024-04/wetlands-status-and-trends-report-2009-to-2019_0.pdf

² *Ctr. for Biological Diversity v. Zeldin*, No. 24-5101 (D.C. Cir. Mar. 27, 2026), *affirming Ctr. for Biological Diversity v. Regan*, No. CV 21-119 (RDM), 2024 WL 1602457 (D.D.C. Apr. 12, 2024).