

September 16, 2026 Testimony of Michael W. Sole, Vice President, Environmental Services, Florida Power & Light Co., before the House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries in support of H.R. 9590 (Rep. Webster), “SAFE for Manatees Act”.

Florida Power & Light (FPL) supports the Study and Assessment of Future Ecosystems (SAFE) for Manatees Act, which directs the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to study long-term warm-water habitat solutions for Florida manatees as coastal industrial facilities transition or retire. The legislation recognizes the importance of proactively planning for the future while bringing together federal, state, and engineering expertise to identify sustainable warm-water refuges for manatees.

Background

- Florida manatees are a subtropical species that are highly susceptible to cold stress and require access to warm-water habitat during winter months to survive.
- Historically, manatees relied primarily on natural warm-water springs and select naturally warm coastal habitats.
- Over the past century, human development significantly altered Florida's waterways and reduced access to some natural spring habitats through dredging, water management projects, navigation channels, and coastal development. Industrial facilities, including electric generating stations, created artificial warm-water discharges that became important winter refuges for manatees.
- As a result, manatees expanded their distribution and developed long-term reliance on some of these artificial warm-water sources.

How Humans Changed Warm-Water Habitat

- Human actions have both created and impacted manatee warm-water habitat.
- Increasing groundwater withdrawals have contributed to concerns regarding diminished spring flows at some natural warm-water refuges. Also, access to many natural springs was reduced or changed by water management projects, dredging, navigation improvements, and coastal development.
- Industrial warm-water discharges provided reliable winter refuges that supported manatee conservation and population recovery over many decades.
- Energy infrastructure is also changing. Older coastal industrial facilities are being retired, repowered, or replaced with technologies that provide less warm-water

discharge, creating uncertainty regarding future winter habitat availability for manatees.

- There have been four power plants that were either retired or relocated.
 - Retired: Reliant Power Plant (near CCEC), Vero Beach Municipal Power Plant, Fort Pierce Power Plant
 - Relocated: Amelia Island Power Plant
- The TECO Bayside and Duke Bartow plants went through repowering and reduced their warm-water discharges but were not completely eliminated.

Manatees are highly susceptible to rapid environmental change. This was demonstrated during the 2022 Atlantic Coast UME. After widespread seagrass loss in the Indian River Lagoon, manatees did not simply relocate to new feeding areas; they continued returning to traditional winter habitat despite the disappearance of their primary food source, resulting in more than 1,250 documented deaths from starvation. The Florida Manatee Warm-Water Habitat Action Plan recognizes the same behavioral dependence on industrial warm-water refuges. Because manatees do not quickly adapt to abrupt habitat changes, the transition away from power plant warm-water discharges must be carefully managed to ensure alternative refugia are available before existing sites are lost.

FPL's Perspective

- FPL has worked closely with federal and state agencies for decades to support manatee conservation and the management of warm-water refuges.
- Today, five of FPL's coastal power plants serve as primary warm-water sites used by manatees during winter months.
 - There are nine total anthropogenic refugia in Florida:
 - Six are primary warm-water sites (5 FPL, 1 TECO)
 - Three are secondary warm-water sites (2 Duke, 1 TECO)
- FPL recognizes that long-term solutions will require collaboration among government agencies, utilities, scientists, and conservation organizations.
- FPL currently participates in the Warm-Water Habitat Regional Partnership Teams (RPTs). These RPTs are comprised of a variety of partners with interests, resources, or technical expertise in the region, habitat, and/or in manatee conservation.

- The SAFE Act provides an opportunity to further develop the scientific foundation needed to guide those future decisions.

Why We Support the SAFE Act

- FPL supports the SAFE for Manatees Act because it promotes proactive, science-based planning for the future of manatee conservation.
- The bill recognizes an important reality: as Florida's industrial landscape evolves, we need a clear understanding of where future warm-water habitat will be available and what alternatives may be needed.
- Studying alternative warm-water habitats before facilities are retired is preferable to reacting after habitat losses occur. This approach helps reduce risk to the species while providing information needed for responsible long-term planning.
- The proposed study complements ongoing efforts by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, utilities, researchers, conservation organizations, and other stakeholders through the Warm-Water Habitat Action Plan and Regional Partnership Teams.