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Manatee habitats face federal review

*BY JIM WAYMER
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Federal officials plan to take a second look at their 1976 list of areas considered most critical for the long-term survival of the sea cow.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service this week agreed to review the manatee's "critical habitat" list, after four environmental groups petitioned the agency. The agency assures that new critical habitat areas won't automatically mean more restrictions on the water.

But the environmental groups say the designation adds another level of scrutiny on permits for docks and other marine structures within the endangered species' most crucial habitats.

Some contractors worry because the spots under consideration are where residents might want a dock, mooring area or other structure. And the prospect of permit scrutiny comes at an inopportune time for an industry reeling from the recession.

"It is simply a means of trying to tie up the status quo in more knots," said Steven Webster, former executive director of Florida Marine Contractors Association, a trade group of dock builders. "When you create new designation in areas, you suddenly find that regulators do not know how to apply those new designations in those areas."

Webster lives on Merritt Island along Newfound Harbor, one of the waterways being considered as critical habitat.

New "critical habitat" designations could make permits for docks and other marine structures more difficult in natural tributaries to the Indian River Lagoon such as the Sykes Creek, Mullet Creek, Turkey Creek and Crane Creek.

Even manmade canals such as Barge Canal, Berkeley Canal in Satellite Beach and the C-54 Canal along Brevard's southern border are being considered for future "critical" habitat.

Other new areas proposed by the four environmental groups include: St. Sebastian River, Grand Canal and the Cocoa Beach residential canals, Rinkers Canal, Banana Creek, Haulover Canal, Bair's Cove, and the Mosquito Lagoon in Brevard and Volusia counties, and all other associated waterways.

Current "critical habitat" includes general geographic areas: the Banana River and all waterways between Indian and Banana River; and the entire inland section of the Indian River Lagoon, from its northernmost point south of the intersection of U.S. 1 and State Road 3.

The environmental groups that petitioned for the review want the "critical habitat" list to include more specific areas, as well as the reasons for listing them.

"It just ensures a more official review," said Pat Rose, executive director of the Save the Manatee Club, a Maitland-based environmental group.