



A Call to Action

Urge City Council to maintain USFWS management of Three Sisters Springs as a Refuge

The City of Crystal River (City) has begun the process to revoke a management agreement between the City, Southwest Florida Water Management District, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) that allows the 57-acre Three Sisters Springs property to be managed as part of the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). If the City is successful, the refuge would no longer have management authority over the warm water springs used by manatees during the winter and the land would no longer be managed as part of the refuge. Instead, the City would develop the area as a City park to capitalize on the financial benefits of ecotourism. For example, the City currently manages access to the property and has set entrance fees at \$15 per person. While some City officials said the ticket price/entrance fees for adults was too high, others said the price is worth it to the numerous international tourists, who already pay a lot to travel to Crystal River.

The property was purchased through a public/private partnership involving multiple agencies and support from the community to make Three Sisters Springs part of the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge. The Department of Interior/Service contributed \$3.225 million along with \$1.775 million in private donations raised by the Friends of Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge Complex, the Felburn Foundation, and the National Wildlife Refuge Association towards the purchase of the \$5 million water rights as part of the \$10.5 million deal to purchase the property and the springs.

The City is citing the Service's inability to develop sufficient public access and capital improvements on the property and lack of federal funding and staff as failure to uphold their end of the management agreement. While the Service acknowledges that implementation of the approved management plan has not progressed as desired, progress has been stalled by a lack of a unified vision among the City, the Service, and the broader public. It is important to note that the Refuge has assisted the City in meeting the intent of Florida Communities Trust (FCT) in granting funds to the City for the purchase of the property and that 19 of the 21 FCT restrictive covenants have been completed or are ongoing.

In January and April 2017, City officials were notified the Service will not invest any more money in improvements to the property until the Management Agreement and Management Plan was updated to establish priorities for the short- and long-term management of the property and improve the coordination between the City and the Refuge to accomplish common goals. Subsequently, the City initiated the process to terminate the management agreement. We need an effective partnership between the Service and the City to manage the property in the best interest of the community and for the benefit and conservation of manatees and other natural resources to be protected.

The Refuge is prepared to invest significant funding into permanent restroom facilities, trails and buildings and habitat management, but must ensure a long-term agreement between the Service and the City. To do so, the dynamics between the City of Crystal River and the Refuge must improve. Otherwise, 100% of the costs would fall on the City - and therefore the citizens of Crystal River.

We need your help to write to the City Council members and Governor Rick Scott to tell them why it's important to YOU that the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge manages Three Sisters Springs and to explain why YOU feel that is critical that this safe-haven for wintering manatees remains an integral part of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Unfortunately, the City may continue to move forward with the revocation, and could take further action at an upcoming council meeting in January. Please join us in urging our elected officials to stop the process to terminate the management agreement with the Service and instead to work with the Service as a true partner. While there is nothing more powerful than a personal letter to convey your message, we have provided a suggested message in the link (sample letter) that you can use or modify to best articulate your opinion.

Thank you for your support in keeping this jewel part of the Refuge!

The Friends of the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge

Board of Directors.