

## **Panther Recovery Plan Implementation Team**

### **Transportation SubTeam**

#### **Meeting Summary**

January 29, 2015

Charlotte Harbor Environmental Center, Punta Gorda, FL

#### Attendees:

Amber Crooks, Conservancy of Southwest Florida

Elizabeth Fleming, Defenders of Wildlife

Terry Gilbert, FWC (via phone)

Darrell Land, FWC

Nancy Payton, Florida Wildlife Federation, SubTeam Chair

Brent Setchell, FDOT

Donald Scott, Lee MPO

Daniel Smith, UCF

John Wrublik, USFWS (via phone)

Laurie MacDonald, Defenders of Wildlife, PRIT Liaison

Erin Myers, FWS acting Florida Panther Recovery Coordinator

Jim Beaver, Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council

Two members of the public attended.

- Welcome
- Approval of last meeting minutes
- SubTeam communications
  - The PRIT has provided direction that the group not provide input on transportation needs of developments/mines.
  - The group will be referred to as a “SubTeam”, because the members were appointed and received letters from regional office that described us as such.
  - Erin Myers is the acting Florida Panther Recovery Coordinator through end of January. Tracy Melbiess will be the next coordinator through February.
- Jim Beaver provided a presentation entitled “A Unified CE Mapping and Database for the State of Florida,” which described a project to map permanent conservation easements. Water Management District regulatory easements are captured, once they

have been recorded with the County, however about 20% of SFWMD easements are not recorded with the respective County.

- The project will not detail condition of lands (e.g. enforcement issues such as trash, exotics maintenance).
- The project is to be completed September 2015.
- Maintaining the database into the future was identified as an ongoing need.
- John Wrublik provided information regarding current FWS panther underpass policies
  - There are currently no specific guidelines of when a crossing will be requested by FWS in compensation for development or other activities.
  - The current regulatory focus is within the “Panther Focus Area”, but the FWS can also consult on projects that have the potential to increase vehicle traffic if outside of the Focus Area.
  - Per FWS’ current policy, a crossing or other similar measures cannot substitute habitat replacement.
  - A crossing or other similar measures can be requested on transportation/road project at the state or local level. It can also be requested of developments or other activities, if it will increase traffic.
  - FWS can reinstate consultation if more mortality occurs than originally provided in Biological Opinion.
  - There was a comment that credit needs to be provided for crossings; otherwise there is little incentive to do so.
    - FWS assesses impacts from both habitat loss and potential for increased road mortalities. Therefore, both of these factors may need to be addressed/compensated for in the FWS process.
  - There was a comment in support of existing FWS policy to not allow crossings to substitute for habitat replacement, due to the need to protect the habitat base.
  - There was a comment that the group and/or FWS should develop a triggering threshold (i.e. daily trips, etc) for requesting or requiring a crossing that then could be built where needed within the project action area.
- Jim Beever will coordinate with the SubTeam on an inventory of existing crossings and other similar structures.
- FDOT Guidelines Changes and Discussion
  - The group went through suggested revisions of the current FDOT Guidelines.
  - Changes discussed included adding in criteria for “bridge shelves,” as well as crossings to meet FDOT criteria if conservation lands would be acquired prior to the design phase.
  - Group will continue discussion of recommended changes at the next meeting.

- Cost-Surface Mapping Project and Discussion of Southwest Florida Data Map
  - Group discussed what the proper land cover categories and assigned values should be for the cost-surface mapping project. There was a consensus to start with the categories and values found in Swanson, et al. and the FWS Panther Assessment Methodology.
  - Next steps for the project will be to finalize land cover value to panthers, determine the source and destination of the panthers, and alter scorings for roads if they have crossings.
  
- Pending tasks
  - Review bridge replacement list to see if crossings or other similar measures can be incorporated into upcoming projects.
  - Compendium of structure types will be continued.
  
- Next meeting
  - 03/12/15, 10am-3pm, Archibold Biological Station