

# News Release

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## **Florida Panther Recovery Plan, Third Revision Available; Media Teleconference Set for Dec. 18 at 11 a.m.**

VERO BEACH, Fla. -- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announces the availability of the third revision of the Florida panther recovery plan. The plan is expected to be officially announced tomorrow via the Federal Register.

The Florida panther is the last subspecies of *Puma* (also known as mountain lion, cougar, puma, or catamount) still surviving in the eastern U.S. Historically occurring throughout the southeastern U.S., today the remaining approximately 100 panthers are found in south Florida and restricted to less than five percent of their historic range. The Florida panther was federally listed as an endangered species in 1967 and ultimately under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The Service issued the first recovery plan in 1981, and it was revised in 1987 and 1995.

"Partnerships are an important element of this finalized recovery plan and are extremely vital to the success of the Florida panther conservation efforts," said Sam Hamilton, regional director for the Service's Southeast Region. "Working with our partners and the public is critical if we are to continue making strides toward recovering the Florida panther."

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission is among the partners working directly with the Service to recover the Florida panther. Its director, Ken Haddad, concurs that this ongoing partnership is critical to conserving Florida panthers and their habitats. "Florida panthers are part of our nation's and state's wildlife heritage. The state of Florida has been a key partner in panther conservation for the past three decades and Floridians have demonstrated their strong support for panther conservation. We're pleased to be part of the team that will implement this comprehensive plan," he said.

This recovery plan includes specific recovery objectives and criteria to be met in order to reclassify (downlist) and eventually delist the Florida panther under the Endangered Species Act. The plan also includes provisions that contemplate reintroduction of panthers in locations across the Southeast. While this plan considers reintroduction necessary to ultimately recover the

species, reintroduction is not likely to occur for years and it will not under any circumstances be pursued without closely working with state agencies, conservation groups and other stakeholders. Opportunities for public comment and a broad outreach and education initiative would also be involved in any possible reintroduction efforts.

The panther requires large contiguous areas that contain prey and has dense understory for feeding, resting and denning. Limiting factors for the Florida panther are habitat availability and prey availability. Habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation are among the greatest threats to panther survival. Panther mortality due to collisions with vehicles threatens potential population expansion. Restoring the panther to the point where it is again a secure, self-sustaining member of its ecosystem is a primary goal of the endangered species program and public support is critical in this endeavor.

The plan and associated materials can be downloaded beginning tomorrow at <http://www.fws.gov/verobeach/>, or for more information, contact Chris Belden, South Florida Ecological Services Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1339 20th Street, Vero Beach, Florida 32960 (772-562-3909).

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**Editors' Note: Paul Souza, Field Supervisor for the Service's South Florida Ecological Services Office, is conducting a telephonic news conference to discuss the recovery plan on Thursday, Dec. 18, 2008 at 11 a.m. (EST). News media representatives who would like to participate should call 1-800-619-4083. The pass code is PANTHER. The conference number is 7232255 and the name of the conference leader is Ken Warren.**