

Media Advisory

Department of the Interior
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
South Florida Field Office
1339 20th Street
Vero Beach, FL 32960
Phone: (772) 562-3909, ext. 323
Fax: (772) 778-5498
<http://www.fws.gov/verobeach/>

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Contacts: Ken Warren, 772-643-4407 (mobile)
ken_warren@fws.gov
John Bell, 772-970-3394
prseitz@bellsouth.net

USFWS Approves 4,000-Acre Panther Passage Conservation Bank in Hendry County, Florida

VERO BEACH, Fla. -- The endangered Florida Panther's habitat in southwest Florida received crucial land preservation restoration with the federal approval of the 4,000-acre Panther Passage Conservation Bank in rural Hendry County, west of Lake Okeechobee and south of the Caloosahatchee River (see attached map).

Habitat loss, one of the greatest threats to panther survival, has today restricted south Florida's breeding population (estimated to be about 100) to less than five percent of its historic range.

The 4,000 acres, according to Dr. George Dennis of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), are located in the "Panther Dispersal Zone," a corridor that could provide passage for south Florida panther populations to move north of the Caloosahatchee River in time.

"Securing these vital lands is a major part of our efforts to recover the endangered Florida panther. This important partnership helps us address one of the goals in our Florida Panther Recovery Plan: To set aside large areas of land in locations where there are high-quality habitats and prey availability," said Paul Souza, Field Supervisor of the USFWS' South Florida Ecological Services Office.

"This particular site is an active cattle ranch and consists of diverse landscapes including wooded areas and wetlands. Much of it is forested, with lots of good cover—that's very valuable because it's already in good condition for panthers," said Dr. Dennis.

Originally purchased by Yugoslavian immigrant George Milicevic in the 1940s, the 4,000 acres is part of several land holdings in Florida, including property in Lake Wales and LaBelle. Milicevic's heirs recently decided to honor the elder Milicevic's wishes to preserve the Hendry County land by creating a conservation area, which will be supported through the sale of habitat credits to developers and others who need to compensate for the environmental impacts of a project.

Conservation "banks" are typically used when it makes more sense for a developer to purchase conservation credits than to protect part of the area being developed (for example, when on-site conservation would result in small, isolated sites).

"Conservation banking is one of the few mechanisms we have to protect large parcels of land at no cost to the government. Now that the agreement is finalized the landowner will still get to use the land and make money on it by selling credits to developers. It's a win-win...most especially for Florida panthers," said Dr. Dennis.

A properly managed conservation bank, which must be approved by a state or federal wildlife agency, can be a win-win for the landowner, developer, environment and public. The USFWS approved the Panther Passage Conservation Bank in late 2009.

Desmond Duke, whose South Florida-based The Wetlandsbank Group is representing the Panther Passage Conservation Bank, said the project was permitted by a team consisting of Shutts and Bowen LLC, DuBois Real Estate and Wilson Miller.

Duke said Panther Passage has positioned itself to become a preeminent habitat conservation bank in southwest Florida. "It's the only pre-approved conservation bank able to provide panther habitat credits for impacts both north and south of the Caloosahatchee River," he said.

According to Duke, the size and location of the conservation bank will provide fundamental benefits to the Florida Panther and will allow the mitigation project to generate a large supply of Panther Habitat Units which will be made available to clients at competitive market rates.

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Editor's Notes: The Panther Passage Conservation Bank is the second approved and certified conservation bank in Florida. The other is the 1,920-acre Florida Panther Conservation Bank, also in Hendry County.

The Wetlandsbank Group is a pioneer in the ecosystems market and has founded some of the first and most successful examples of environmental mitigation banking efforts in Florida and the United States. For more information contact Desmond Duke at 1-800-301-1707 ext 106 or e-mail at dduke@wetlandsbank.com.

