

News Release



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U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service Will Correct Panther Information In Response to Information Quality Act Challenge

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has accepted the recommendation of a three-member panel of senior Interior Department officials that found the agency did not move quickly enough to correct some scientific information related to Florida panthers and disseminated some uncorrected documents.

At the same time, the panel made clear it believes “the Service played a major role in identifying these scientific concerns and supporting their investigation” by establishing a Florida Panther sub team of the Multi-Species Ecosystem Recovery Implementation Team, and by working with the State of Florida to convene a Scientific Review Team to address questions raised about some of the research.

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility and Andy Eller, a Service employee, filed a petition under the Information Quality Act in May 2004. The Service responded in July 2004 and the petitioners appealed shortly thereafter. The agency released the response to that appeal today.

“The Service used panther information that had been scientifically peer reviewed, but we and others engaged in panther science and conservation identified significant limitations in its methodology and conclusions,” said Service Deputy Director Marshall Jones. “This is a common outcome of the scientific process. However, we should have moved more quickly to incorporate this evolving knowledge into some planning documents and biological opinions, an oversight that we regret and are working to correct.

“I am heartened by the panel’s finding that the Service itself played a major role in identifying concerns with this data, which is evidence of our continuing commitment to using the best scientific information,” Jones added.

“The Florida panther’s ecology is one that involves a number of complex and competing viewpoints,” said Sam Hamilton, regional director for the Service’s Southeast Region. “We have

been working with the state and many scientists to constantly improve the science we use in panther conservation efforts.

“The law requires us to use the best science available, and information available to us continuously evolves,” Hamilton added. “As we learn more about panther ecology we improve the body of knowledge. We recognized many of the questions that have been raised, we established scientific review teams to address them, and we are working closely with the State of Florida on new analyses. All of this will improve the science we use to collectively benefit the Florida panther.”

The panel findings released by the Director included the following:

- The Service did appropriately acknowledge that a discussion of panther habitat in the Multi-Species Recovery Plan was in serious dispute. However, because the agency allowed it to remain in circulation without a disclaimer, it violated the IQA. The panel agreed the Service’s ongoing work to address those questions is adequate, but recommended the use of a disclaimer in the meantime.
- The Service disseminated a draft Landscape Conservation Strategy prior to adequately addressing questions raised about panther telemetry, habitat use, and modeling, that arose during the peer review process. Because the draft document was circulated without the appropriate disclaimer, it violated the IQA.
- The Service did not correct the record in four biological opinions that had been issued to the Corps of Engineers when it was discovered that the biological opinions had confused the terms "Minimum Viable Population" and "Current Verified Population" of panthers.

Jones said the Service will take the following corrective actions:

- The Service will immediately update panther-related provisions of the Multi-Species Recovery plan, incorporating appropriate recommendations of the Science Review Team, and make them available for public comment. Until then, the Service will use a disclaimer addressing the questions about some of the research relied upon.
- The Service will end further dissemination of the draft Landscape Conservation Strategy and continue its work to address all peer review comments as well as recommendations made by the Scientific Review Team. The Service will post notice on its web site regarding this action.
- The Service will take the necessary steps to correct the Service files on several biological opinions to address confusion created over the use of Minimum Viable Populations and Current Verified Populations of panthers by August 1, 2005.
- The Service will provide notification that these steps have been taken through its web sites and other venues.

Over the past 25 years, panther numbers have roughly quadrupled to nearly 90. Land acquisition has played an important role. In 1989, the Service established the 26,000-acre Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge. In addition, the Service is continuing to work with its partners to advance science and what biologists know about the Florida panther to conserve its habitat and bolster its population.

“Over the past 15 years, we have worked closely with the Fish and Wildlife Service to conserve Florida panther habitat and increase the panther population,” said Ken Haddad, executive director of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. “As the panther's numbers increase, it’s clear we are making progress on a complex conservation challenge, and I think that is largely because of the strong partnership we've forged with the Service. We are working together to secure a future for the Florida panther, and as we learn more, we'll be even more effective.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 Fish and Wildlife Management offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.