

Panther Recovery Implementation Team (PRIT)
Transportation SubTeam
Meeting Minutes
April 29, 2020
Webinar

Attendees:

Meredith Budd
Katasha Cornwell
Amber Crooks
Elizabeth Fleming
Terry Gilbert
Don Scott
Brent Setchell
Dan Smith
John Wrublik

Guests/Members of the Public:

Tabitha Beale, Polk County
Kristin Caruso
Chris Dailey
Nicole Monies
Lauren Peters
Tom Pride
Denise Rach
Benjamin Shepherd
William Whidden

David Shindle, FWS Staff Liaison

- No update. He is fully busy with panther SSA. No date of completion to share as of yet. Recommendation team did meet but no other details.

Elizabeth Fleming, Core Team Liaison

- Nothing specific. Main priority that Elizabeth shared at the last meeting, continues. I-4 recommendations into a report form needed.

Sharing of Information

- I-75 Managed Lanes Study
 - Meetings postponed. More information can be found here www.swflinterstates.com/i75-connect-south-corridor.
 - New PD&E study, broken up into three segments: South segment from Collier County to Charlotte County. Northern from Charlotte to Manatee. I-4 segment through Polk County.
 - A review for wildlife structures would be appropriate through this process.
- Hurricane fencing repairs completed
 - Alligator Alley repairs complete.

- Discussed recent news story about large alligator that was trapped on Alligator Alley I-75, on the south side of the road near MM79. John and Meredith says sometimes alligators can climb fences, but unlikely to climb the tall fence that exists on I-75. Dan suggested that the alligator could have accessed I-75 at SR 29 where fencing ends or through holes cut in the fence by fishermen.
- Eastern Collier Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP)
 - Following discussion at last meeting, Amber asked for updates and mentioned there was a comment period that closed in February.
 - Tom said he don't know timeframe for review. Last the Subteam members heard, it is being discussed internally by USFWS and expecting to see a decision in Fall 2020. Dan says Rivergrass may be opting out of HCP and asked can they opt out of the plan on individual projects? Elizabeth said Rivergrass hasn't opted out, they are only moving forward in the Collier County process. Elizabeth says she would have preferred until HCP finalized before moving forward with individual projects. If the applicants want to remove a project from the HCP, they would have reinitiate. Rivergrass has implications for traffic on Oil Well Road. Amber will get with Meredith off line about the discussion regarding the 50,000+ acre envelope for Covered Activities envelope.
- FWF Wildlife Crossings Manual
 - The working group had a meeting recently. Making strides about what type of information to put in the manual and what format. They will be presenting the draft results of the statewide hotspots model at the next meeting which will likely be July.
 - The products will include: the manual, data layer for hotspots statewide that can be included in EDTM, and inventory of existing structures.
 - This project will run through 2021. Dan can share the schedule with the Subteam members.
 - Working group members include Dan Smith, Katasha Cornwell, Meredith Budd, Brent Setchell, Elizabeth Fleming, and Darrell Land. The working group also includes additional members from FWC, FWS, FDOT, and other reps.
- Alligator alley resurfacing comment period/HHH Ranch
 - Brent said that FDOT is completing the topographic survey and getting started on design.
 - F-stop foundation is monitoring the existing culverts, which are double 12' x 5'. No panthers or bears yet. They have been monitoring since January 2020. They are a great help. There are some bats shown on the wildlife cameras.
 - Dan asked about the water levels in the culverts. Low so far because it is dry season. Even if they used the culverts, they would have to swim canals. Brent wants to address the canal access issue.
 - Amber asked about restoration activities increasing water depth. Meredith says additional ~100 cfs through these culverts. She talked to USFWS and they said that should not impact the ability of wildlife to use the culverts. Current water line is about 2' deep. They will continue to collect camera information into the wet season.
 - Meredith spoke about HHH ranch (FKA Hussey Ranch), which is close to one of the culverts. It is up for sale, being considered by the County for purchase. There

is a desire to increase the existing conservation/mitigation lands that are north of I-75 within North Belle Meade. FDOT's study suggested that it would look at wildlife crossing in this area if more conservation lands were acquired. Meredith said this is an opportunity, if acquired. Dan asked about existing conservation lands in this area. Amber said there may be additional mitigation lands that aren't reflected on the maps that Brent showed for the FDOT report.

- Dan says the City of Daytona Beach has cleared areas and begun excavation for fill dirt impacting the approach area to the wildlife crossing (~mm127) on I-4 in Volusia County. FDOT and SJRWMD are investigating the issue. The problem is that the area surrounding this particularly wildlife crossing is not under conservation easement. Because adverse land use activities were not anticipated, the wildlife crossing was not being monitored for negative impacts.
- S.2302 America's Transportation Infrastructure Act of 2019
 - Amber mentioned this bill that speaks to authorizations for a 'wildlife crossing pilot program.'
 - Elizabeth mentioned that Defenders' DC office is trying to put language in COVID-19 stimulus bills that would help fund wildlife crossings and conserving public lands.
- SR29 EAG
 - Elizabeth and Lauren said that this group is on hold. Meredith flagged timeline in hotspots reported needed to be updated for this project. Amber suggested that FDOT provide a letter or email to the EAG members to notify them of the delay.
- I-4 fast tracking due to coronavirus
 - There was a mention in the newspaper that some of the projects have been fast tracked due to less traffic on the roadways because of coronavirus. The project that is being fast tracked is I-4 Ultimate. Brent said that expedited work is for those projects already under construction.
- M-CORES
 - (Don Scott left for this agenda item.) Elizabeth reported that the tasks force reports were due to the legislature and governor on October 1, 2020 and has now been pushed back to November 15, 2020.
 - SW central task force had meeting yesterday. They will keep meeting virtually until the time of which the task force can meet in person. Elizabeth expressed frustration at the meeting with the project going forward despite the problems presented to the public by coronavirus. Public comment during this day was about two hours and overwhelmingly objecting to the roads. Meredith mentioned that it might be difficult for public to hear their name or know when their name might come up within 6 hours of projected commenting time. There was some discussion about whether or not the list was for all three task force meetings combined, as some folks' names called when they didn't intend to attend or comment.
 - FDOT is providing task force members individualized meetings to go over attraction and avoidance areas.

Pasco County Wildlife Ordinance by Rene Brown

- Presentation regarding the Pasco County ordinance.

- The ordinance discussion was prompted by a year 2000 settlement. They performed a wildlife habitat protection study. In 2004 and 2014, there were comp plan amendments to protect wildlife linkages. Sales tax implemented “Penny for Pasco.”
- 2016 corridor ordinance passed by BCC. 2019 first acquisition under this ordinance. 2600 acres preserved so far.
- The ordinance includes incentives – i.e. variances to heights, setbacks, landscaping requirements park requirements. Or compensation. Permitted uses include cattle leases. Local roads, utilities prohibited unless certain exemptions. Wildlife underpasses required that meet certain design criteria. 10’ x 12’ crossing being placed currently on road that is being widened.
- Meredith asked about penny tax acquisition v. management. Meredith asked about development within corridor, what would be triggered and what is optional. For single family homes, they check for wetlands and corridors.
- Amber asked how wide are the linkages? What are the identified target species? The answer was 2200 feet wide. Typically have river or creek as backbone, i.e. 5 mile creek, Hillsborough river. Some of the shorter ones are 1100 feet. They determined through their 2002 wildlife study, target species were large mammals bears, bobcats, deer.
- Dan Smith would like to follow up with Rene. May be relevant to his work on manual and statewide hotspots. Connect with Suncoast Parkway? Rene says yes. Have you done any camera monitoring? Rene says no, not consistently. Dan asked about site selection process and design that was used.
- Elizabeth asked about settlement that prompted the program. Rene said rapid development and protecting wetlands and wildlife in general.
- Brent supported efforts. And would like to share what Pasco has done with other counties.
- Rene and Subteam would like to exchange information about design, cost, etc.
- Dan asked about ecological corridor effort, Tom Hctor. He was involved early.
- Brent asked about getting “Penny for Pasco” passed. Rene says that there was a strong grassroots effort. Once passed, put signage wherever there was use of the funds for visibility.

March 2020 meeting w/ Polk County & City of Lakeland

- Met to speak about the proposed I-4 wildlife crossing near SR 33. Brent said that both entities seem to be supportive of the corridor, recognize it. Looked at Peace River corridor line up to Green Swamp in the north, across I-4.
- Dan asked about slope on access ramp. 5% says Brent. Dan will send photos of I-95 (Pellicer Creek) overpass to Brent. Reviewed on Google Earth. Planned 44’ wide. Dan would like to look at the design. Flaws in planters screening, walls too high. In the I-4 planned one, the walls are about 8’. The I-95 and I-75 bridges were designed for recreational trails, not wildlife passage. Many aspects could be improved to enhance use by wildlife.
- FDOT owns some of the ROW but is looking to acquire additional ROW to preserve the wildlife corridor leading up to the crossing.
- Development coming in close by, some already on the ground.

Finalizing Reports:

- I-4 Report
 - Update on I-4 WGS #1 557 project. Sent options for consultants. Construction should be begin in early 2021. Small culvert on SR 557 added. Small private track on the west side of SR 557 would be nice for acquisition to add to the area.
 - To finish the report, we need finalized maps. Brent intends to do these maps in early May. For the maps, we may want to rename “FDOT alternative 1” to “upland linkages” overpasses (ie C5 and C7), etc. The rest can be removed per Dan. We want to include in the map both the FDOT preferred locations and the other needs that have been identified by Dan.
 - C1 is FDOT preferred and scheduled for construction early 2021.
 - Eastern FDOT opportunity is unfunded. Could that be addressed in the managed lane study?
 - Next step is David Shindle review and core team feedback.
 - The Subteam expressed the need for continuing this type of report to include opportunities and challenges between south Florida to the I-4 corridor area. This could be mentioned in this report, but the focus of a future report.
 - Dan will add in any information about the eastern upland linkages if missing.
 - Brent will probably be reformatting to adjust the maps closer to the text.
- Updating Hotspots
 - Need final edits from all. Have received edits from Meredith and Brent so far.
 - Subteam took a closer look at Hotspot G in Hendry County. On edge of ecological greenway. Wetland corridor close by.
 - Twin Eagles area.
 - Meredith can ask Ricky about the date Twin Eagles was constructed. (We found out that the Twin Eagles crossing was built in 2004.)
 - No fencing in that area. Some panthers aren’t using the Twin Eagles crossing because of the absence of fencing to direct them to the crossing.
 - Wildlife are crossing over the road surface and using land bridges over the canal near some of the mortalities. Elizabeth will follow up with Jim Beever for more information about the Twin Eagles area hotspot to add into our report.
 - Meredith and Dan will fact check the asterisks to be sure that these fall within the new segments (since we are using a new model). Meredith recommends removing that asterisk for the Twin Eagles area site. Brent will provide Dan and Meredith the hotspot shape file to do that check.
 - Continued discussion about urban hotspots
 - Who is in for speed zone or other measures working group (i.e. signage, education, enforcement): Dan, Meredith, Elizabeth, Amber.
 - Brent suggested talking to Naples Zoo regarding speed zone enforcement.
 - Continue to include Keri Road and SR82 sheets in the hotspots report even though they have changed since prior models and become less “hot”.
 - Elizabeth will check on if this report needs to go back to the core team and David Shindle for approval. Next steps after that is recipient list.
 - Amber will make changes from today’s call. Meredith and Dan checking asterisks. Resend for one final check by Subteam before sending to Elizabeth/core team.

- LCP modeling
 - Dan will need assistance and writing with a few weeks (mid-May). Who can assist? Meredith, Amber, Elizabeth.

Next meeting scheduled for:

- Late May - I-4 report meeting if we need it (via email) and LCP meeting
- Next full PRIT TS meeting in July (July 8, 2020).
 - Agenda to include:
 - RADS
 - If I-4 report fairly complete can move forward with inviting other entities
 - Tom Hctor
 - LCP