



Protecting Southwest Florida's unique natural environment and quality of life ... now and forever.

By Certified Mail/Return Receipt Requested & Email

June 5, 2015

Sharneka Harvey, FOIA Coordinator
US Fish and Wildlife Service
1875 Century Blvd.
Atlanta, GA 30345

RE: FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT REQUEST Pertaining to Florida Panther Protection Program, Eastern Collier Multispecies Habitat Conservation Plan, Town of Big Cypress/Rural Lands West

Dear FOIA Officer:

I am submitting this request under the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552, on behalf of the Conservancy of Southwest Florida ("Conservancy") with the address of 1495 Smith Preserve Way, Naples, FL 34102. The Conservancy is a non-profit corporation organized under the laws of the State of Florida.

REQUESTED DOCUMENTS

The Conservancy is interested in documents regarding the Florida Panther Protection Program (FPPP), proposed Eastern Collier Multispecies Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP), Town of Big Cypress proposed development (now may be known as Rural Lands West), and other related concepts and projects related to the Rural Lands Stewardship Area (RLSA) of Collier County (including but not limited to "trapped Panther Habitat Units", transportation planning and roadway projects, and other named or unnamed projects within the RLSA).

We very much appreciate the Service in providing us documents pertaining to these issues similar to what was described in a December 1, 2010 memo.¹ Although we understand that the Service relied upon FOIA principles in determining what documents would be released to us during this process, we submit this request to ensure that all releasable documents are appropriately provided.

This request excludes only the documents that have been provided from the Service through prior FOIA requests and those that have been previously released in their entirety through the process outlined in the memorandum beginning December 1, 2010.

¹ US Fish and Wildlife Service, December 1, 2010. Memorandum to the public, from South Florida Ecological Services Office, Vero Beach. Subject: FTP site purpose and file organization for the Eastern Collier Multispecies Habitat Conservation Plan.

The Conservancy requests the following:

- All documents regarding the Florida Panther Protection Program (FPPP) from January 8, 2010 to present.
- All documents regarding the application for Section 10 incidental take permit/Eastern Collier Multispecies Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) from January 8, 2010 to present. Response documents should include, but not be limited, all documents regarding:
 - The “north corridor”, including information as it relates to lands outside of Collier County
 - Concept of “trapped Panther Habitat Units (PHUs)”
 - Other named or unnamed projects including mines, developments, etc. that would be included under the HCP
 - Transportation planning and roadways that would be related to the HCP
 - Materials provided by the applicant to the Service in April 2015 which includes the draft HCP and Notice of Intent for a Draft Environmental Impact Statement
- All documents regarding the development project known as Town of Big Cypress (TOBC, aka Rural Lands West)(Corps Permit Application No. SAJ-2008-210 IP-MAE, Service Federal Activities Code 41420-2008-FA-0800) from January 8, 2010 to present.
- Log of meetings with the applicants regarding the HCP, including meeting notes and records from January 8, 2010 to present.
- Log of meetings with the applicant regarding the TOBC, including meeting notes and records from January 8, 2010 to present.

Please keep in mind that if documents have been made available to non-applicant parties by the Service, that they should be releasable to other public non-applicant parties, such as the Conservancy of Southwest Florida.

When the term “document” is used below, you should assume it to include any and all information, including but not limited to, all letters, e-mails, documents, electronic records, surveys, GIS files and attribute tables, memos, direction to/from national, regional and field offices, informal notes, etc., including sidebars and handwritten or typed margin notes, sent to, from, or among any U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service’s (“FWS”) staff, including line officers or any other person in the employment of the FWS (including contractors and specialists) as well as any personal knowledge or information gained through personal communication or otherwise.

FEE WAIVER REQUEST

We further request that any fees associated with this request be waived because disclosure of the records is “likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of government and is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 43 C.F.R. Part 2. The basis for the fee waiver request is set out below. If you determine that a fee waiver is not appropriate, please contact me to discuss the approximate cost of obtaining the requested documents.

1. Released information concerns the operations or activities of the government.

The Conservancy is seeking information pertaining to the FPPP, HCP, TOBC, and other proposals within the RLSA of Collier County, and the decisions, operations, and activities of the US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) pertaining to these issues. This information is central to an understanding of the Service’s decision making process and the basis for its decisions pertaining to the permitting of these proposals. Decisions regarding the permitting of developments, particularly those that impact listed species such as the Florida panther, are highly controversial public issues in the community, particularly with regard to the Service’s permitting procedures that permit encroachment on and destruction of listed species’ habitats.

2. Disclosure of the requested documents will serve the public interest as it is “likely to contribute significantly to the public’s understanding of the operations or activities of the [Service].” 5 U.S.C. §552(a)(4)(A)(iii). The public has an expressed interest in the Service complying with the Endangered Species Act (“ESA”), which exists, among other reasons, to ensure that federal agencies protect endangered species and their habitat. The Conservancy is seeking to promote and protect this public interest through the requested documents. The public interest in the disclosure of these documents is significant, because they may reflect potentially significant policy changes on the part of the Service that could affect critically important listed species habitats. Information that could “support oversight of [an agency’s] operations” is precisely the type of information that Congress considered to have a “high potential for contribution to public understanding.” McClellan Ecological Seepage Situation v. Carlucci, 835 F.2d 1282, 1286 (9th Cir. 1987). “Watchdog” public advocacy groups -such as the Conservancy, which actively monitor and challenge agency actions and policies- help provide this oversight function in our system of government.

The Conservancy is requesting the information as a “watchdog” organization dedicated to providing the public information about government activities, or lack thereof, to protect endangered species and its habitat. Congress has recognized the important institutional service “watchdog” groups provide, and expanded FOIA’s fee waiver provision specifically to facilitate access to agency records by citizen “watchdog” organization, which utilize FOIA to monitor and mount challenges to governmental activities. See *Better Gov’t Ass’n v. Department of State*, 780 F.2d 86, 88-89 (D.C. Cir. 1986) (fee waiver intended to benefit public interest “watchdogs”).

Fee waivers are essential to such groups which:

...rely heavily and frequently on FOIA and its fee waiver provision to conduct the investigations that are essential to the performance of certain of their primary institutional activities – publicizing governmental choices and highlighting possible abuses that otherwise might go undisputed and thus unchallenged. These investigations are the necessary prerequisites to the fundamental publicizing and mobilizing functions of these organizations. Access to information through FOIA is vital to their organizational missions....

The waiver provision was added to FOIA “in an attempt to prevent government agencies from using high fees to discourage certain types of requesters and requests,” in a clear reference to requests from journalists, scholars and, most importantly for our purposes, nonprofit public interest groups.

Better Gov’t Ass’n, 780 F.2d at 93-94.

3. Disclosure of the requested documents will result in a better understanding of Service’s policy by the general public. Disclosure of the requested records will contribute to the understanding of the public at large, as opposed to the understanding only of the Conservancy or a narrow segment of interested persons. The Conservancy disseminates information that it receives from government agencies to its members and members of the public through newsletters and its website, www.conservancy.org. It also sends out press releases on issues of public concern. Furthermore, the Conservancy sometimes challenges decisions of public agencies through administrative and legal actions, which serves to widely disseminate the information and provides an important oversight role specifically envisioned in the passage of FOIA.

4. The public benefit of releasing these documents is significant. Information that could “support oversight of [an agency’s] operations” is precisely the type of information that Congress considered to have a “high potential for contribution to public understanding.” *McClellan Ecological Seepage Situation v. Carlucci*, 835 F.2d 1282, 1286 (9th Cir. 1987). The material requested in the above-referenced FOIA request should offer important insight into the actions and decision-making process of the Service regarding the permitting and review of the HCP, TOBC, and other proposals within the RLSA of Collier County. The legislative history of FOIA includes the following:

A requester is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding if the information disclosed is new; supports public oversight of agency operations; or otherwise confirms or clarifies data on past or present operations of the government.

132 Cong. Rec. H9464 (Representatives English and Kindness). *Better Government Associations* arrived at a comparable conclusion. 780 F.2d at 94. This current request clearly meets this standard.

5. The Conservancy has no commercial interest in the requested information. This request is not primarily in the commercial interest of the Conservancy, as it has no commercial interest in these materials. The Conservancy is a non-profit corporation organized under the laws of the State of Florida and recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to public education about the conservation of natural resources in Southwest Florida. The Conservancy has a long-standing interest in the conservation endangered species and their habitats, and maintains active environmental education, scientific, and policy advocacy programs toward this end.

In sum, application of 5 U.S.C. §552(a)(4) to this request strongly supports a fee waiver. Please waive processing and copying fees pursuant to 5 U.S.C. §552(a)(4). This request for a fee waiver should not be construed as an extension of time in which to reply to this FOIA request.

CONCLUSION

If you determine that portions of any records covered by this request are exempt from disclosure, please separate the exempt portions from the nonexempt portions and provide us with copies of the nonexempt portions. For any records that you determine to be exempt from release, please provide us with a specific description of the record or portion of the record along with a particularized description of the legal basis for withholding it as is required. See *Vaughn v. Rosen*, 484 F.2d 820, 827(D.C. Cir. 1973), *cert. denied*, 415 U.S. 977 (1974).

If any of the documents for which copies are requested of by the Conservancy are available electronically, you may send them to amberc@conservancy.org, or you may send them on a CD or DVD. If there are not electronic versions available, please send paper copies to me at the address contained in this request.

If you anticipate any delay for valid legal reasons in processing this request or if you foresee any problem relating to our request for a fee waiver, please notify me as soon as possible at (239) 262-0304 x286. Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,



Amber Crooks
Senior Natural Resources Specialist

Cc: Jennifer Hecker, Conservancy of Southwest Florida