

# Florida Panther Recovery Implementation Team Meeting Summary

October 27, 2014  
Naples, FL

The meeting began with a review of the agenda. Invited guests who attended all or part of the meeting included Erin Myers (USFWS), Darrell Land (FWC), Tori Foster (FWS), Connie Cassler (FWS), and FWC Commissioner Bergeron (guest speaker). Nancy Payton (FL Wildlife Federation) and Amber Crooks (Conservancy of SW FL) attended part of the meeting as members of the Transportation Work Group.

## **Consideration of Additional Recovery Team Member**

The Service is considering appointing a rancher on the Recovery Team and wanted to hear opinions from Team members. Team members agreed, and offered the following suggestions for a potential nominee: they should have a comprehensive, statewide view of landowner and panther issues, good leadership skills and the ability to reach out to other ranchers/landowners for communication/collaboration. Members also offered the following options for the Service to consider: large or small landowner, owner or producer (lessee), family-owned or corporate ranch, south or north of the Caloosahatchee River? Team members will provide names of potential nominees to the Service.

## **Work Group Updates**

Transportation WG – Laurie Macdonald (FPRIT liaison) and Nancy Payton (WG Chair) provided a brief update. The WG has already held 2 meetings and members are off to an ambitious start! They will be holding open meetings; any public attendees will be allowed as observers. They are planning to address the FDOT guidelines and discuss ongoing research at upcoming meetings. The meeting agendas and notes will be posted on the Recovery Team website.

Inventory & Monitoring WG – Robin Boughton (FPRIT liaison) provided the names of WG nominees: Carol Knox, Darrell Land and Dave Onorato (FWC); David Shindle (Conservancy of SW FL); Roy McBride (Rancher's Supply). Appointment letters will be mailed to nominees so appointments can be finalized. The WG will also consider nominating a statistician at a later time.

Range Expansion WG – Due to limited time, the discussion about nominees for this WG was postponed until the next meeting.

The Team was honored to have FWC Commissioner Bergeron attend this meeting as a guest speaker to present information about conserving panthers and their habitat in South Florida and discuss his intimate knowledge of the FL Everglades. His presentation was very insightful.

## **Payment for Ecosystem Services Concept**

Kevin revised the June PES draft document based on comments from Team members. He discussed the revisions in the new draft, including the addition of a payment for monitoring panthers on private lands. The latter addition came from a discussion that Kevin and Dawn had with NRCS about the PES in July. That meeting with NRCS to discuss the compatibility between their programs, particularly EQIP, with the PES was a result of the feedback we received from our Panther Public Forum in May. We will work together with NRCS to benefit landowners who have panthers on their lands.

Below are the recommendations/action items for the Service from the NRCS meeting:

- 1) Follow up with NRCS concerning methods used for determining PES compensation payment amounts.
- 2) Review the EQIP practices that are funded by NRCS in the Panther Focal Area counties to avoid possible duplication of effort
- 3) Do not consider PES habitat management practices on easements that are already covered by NRCS. USFWS could consider habitat “creation” efforts (i.e., planting trees for panther and prey cover) or panther/prey monitoring on Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) properties. They could also approach neighboring landowners to discuss the PES.
- 4) Determine if USFWS would be able to use the PES to contribute additionally to landowners who are enrolled in EQIP (EQIP pays 50%; could PES add 25%-50% to that?)
- 5) Consider developing a release form for landowners to allow access to information about that landowner’s funded project from NRCS.
- 6) Include monitoring of panthers in the PES as an additional practice to pay for. Panther monitoring could then be covered in the PES for landowners that NRCS is working with because monitoring of panthers is not an NRCS practice - - there would be no possible duplication of effort. USFWS will need to determine the payment cost/acre associated with accessing private lands to conduct monitoring.
- 7) Consider the PES to be transferrable if the landowner decides to sell the land. If the new landowner is not interested in continuing the PES, then the original landowner would need to reimburse the Service at a prorated rate as they do for Partners for Fish and Wildlife projects. USFWS will provide the landowner the ability to opt-out from the PES if funding is unavailable.
- 8) Rework the scope of the PES to submit it as a proposal for possible funding by the NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program next year.

Larry mentioned that the Service is actively seeking sources of funding for the PES, estimated at close to \$2 million for the 3-year pilot study. The Team is ready to have additional discussions with stakeholders on this revised draft concept.

## **Umbrella Safe Harbor Agreement**

The Service has almost completed the draft umbrella SHA intended for landowners north of the River who are interested in participating as Cooperators to the Agreement. This SHA is a mechanism to provide a net conservation benefit for panthers and coverage for landowners for any panthers incidentally taken during implementation of habitat management activities. It also provides an additional regulatory incentive for landowners who volunteer to enroll. Tori Foster gave an overview of how “Panther Habitat Units” are used and calculated for Service regulatory purposes, as those are the

units of measure for determining the SHA baseline and net conservation benefit. Once the draft SHA is completed it will be circulated to Team members and then discussed with stakeholders.

### **Technical Assistance Partners Agreements**

The Service is also working on developing Partners for Fish and Wildlife Agreements for landowners specifically to provide technical assistance for FL panther habitat management/improvement activities. These agreements would not provide funding, but would authorize certain management activities under an intra-service section 7 biological opinion to give landowners assurance that their management activities would not result in incidental take of panthers.

### **Panther Depredations and Agricultural Exemptions**

Dawn briefly mentioned about her discussion with the Collier County Property Appraiser's office about the property tax exemption for hobby livestock. Collier County defers to the State statute which does not require a minimum acreage for agricultural assessment: [http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App\\_mode=Display\\_Statute&URL=0100-0199/0193/Sections/0193.461.html](http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0100-0199/0193/Sections/0193.461.html)

There are also no requirements within the county to secure livestock in pens to deter panther depredations in areas like Golden Gate Estates.

Larry and Dawn mentioned that the Service is investigating some techniques that might reduce conflicts with panther in these residential areas – Foxlights, water scarecrows and bear spray could be options for residents.

Dawn and Todd also mentioned the issues brought up by sportsmen in the BICY that prey (hogs, deer and even small mammals) are rarely seen now and suspected to be in serious decline. They are asking for sustainable balance of panthers and their prey in the BICY.

### **Panther Population Workshop Planning**

Dawn reviewed the agenda and logistics for the Panther Population Workshop scheduled for the next day. The purpose of the workshop is to inform the public about how we are determining a minimum count and population range for panthers, as well as new techniques to estimate the panther population size and density in southwest FL. We want to offer opportunities for private landowners in southwest FL to get involved in a density estimate study (using an expanded camera grid for mark/recapture of panthers) so we will gain information about panthers on private lands.