

MEETING NOTES
Florida Panther Recovery Implementation Team
January 13, 2016 9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
Fish and Wildlife Research Institute
4th Floor Conference Room
100 Eighth Avenue SE
St. Petersburg, FL 33701-5020

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Attendance:

PRIT Core Team: Larry Williams (USFWS), David Shindle (USFWS), Kevin Godsea (USFWS), Robin Boughton (FWC), Elizabeth Fleming (Defenders of Wildlife), Ron Clark (National Park Service), Todd Hallman (Florida Sportsmen's Conservation Association)

PRIT Transportation Sub-Team: Amber Crooks (Conservancy of Southwest Florida)

Larry Williams (LW) announced that PRIT Core Team (CT) and Sub-Team (ST) invite letters had been sent from the FWS Regional Office and welcomed Elizabeth Fleming (EF) as an official member of PRIT. LW discussed Lindsey Wiggins' resignation from PRIT and the issues that arose between the compatibility between UF-IFAS and the Florida Cattlemen's Association. LW praised Lindsey's work and stated that she will continue assist PRIT on issues pertaining to the ranching community. A list of candidates for the rancher representative will be discussed later in the meeting and the intent is to identify a list of top candidates today and hopefully reach a decision quickly on the next rancher representative for PRIT.

TRANSPORTATION SUB-TEAM UPDATE

EF provided an update on the 2-hour phone meeting held by the Transportation Sub-Team (ST) on 17 November 2015. For this meeting, the ST discussed recommendations for the format of the hotspot document. This will be a living document that will be presented to PRIT at a later date. ST also discussed the compendium of existing wildlife crossing structures. EF mentioned the FDOT Crossing Guidelines and that the revisions recommended by the CT were incorporated. David Shindle (DS) confirmed that the final draft of the guidelines along with a letter from LW was sent to Secretary Jim Boxold with FDOT. The ST also discussed an update on the I-75 fencing project spearheaded by the Florida Wildlife Federation (FWF) and some of the issues that have been raised by different agencies and players. LW commented on and commended FDOT for their funding commitment for this project. EF mentioned that Picayune Strand State Forest feels that they were not adequately consulted, but that Nancy Payton (FWF and Transportation ST) has reached out to Division of Forestry to address their concerns. EF stated that Kent Wimmer (Defenders of Wildlife) mentioned the I-75 fencing project at the Florida Transportation Commission (FDOT) meeting and also thanked Secretary Boxold for supporting project and incorporating it into FDOT's 5-year work plan.

Amber Crooks (AC) stated that the next steps for the Transportation ST will be the modeling project with the least-cost pathways work. EF stated that the next ST meeting will be rescheduled and that Stantec will be stepping in to provide assistance with some of Dan Smith's analyses.

Ron Clark (RC) asked about plans to 4-lane State Road 29 north from I-75 to Oil Well Rd and whether the ST has discussed that project and the fate of the wildlife crossings on this stretch of highway. EF stated that the ST has not delved into that highway segment in much detail yet. RC said that the Collier County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) had sent email to the National Park Service. RC raised the

issue that there are private property issues, including ingress and egress of SR29, and preserve access issues at Bear Island and that the Bear Island wildlife crossing is a very sophisticated crossing. Kevin Godsea (KG) stated that when he discussed project with MPO that he suggested that they consider hydrologic restoration as a mitigation measure for the project. RC suggested that this should be something that the ST should examine once more details about the project are known. LW suggested that RC should get up with John Wrublik (FWS). AC stated that Transportation ST member Gwen Pipkin (FDOT) is a representative on that project and that the Transportation ST is still trying to get more information and in particular where additional crossings may be necessary.

RECOVERY CRITERIA SUB-TEAM UPDATE

DS provided Recovery Criteria ST update. Invitation letters from the FWS Regional Director have been received. Seth Willey (FWS) provided a webinar on "Recovery Planning 101", with a specific focus on Recovery Criteria, to the ST on 11 December 2015. On 27 January 2016, Randy Kautz will give a presentation to ST members on how the existing panther recovery criteria were developed and on 28 January 2016, Mike Runge (USGS) will give a presentation on the polar bear recovery planning process and how those recovery criteria were developed. The Recovery Criteria ST is attempting to schedule a 2-day face-to-face meeting in late February or March. However, these dates are still not confirmed due to scheduling conflicts. LW asked if it would be reasonable to request that the Recovery Criteria ST provide a decision after the March meeting on whether the existing panther recovery criteria should be left as-is or revised. KG agreed with LW on the need for a timely decision and forward progress but was uncertain if it would be reasonable to make that request of the ST.

LW stated that the way this process should work in the most official sense would be for the ST to come to PRIT with a recommendation on whether the criteria need to be revised or not (Yes or No statement). PRIT would then consider the ST's recommendation and make a determination on whether they agree or disagree with the recommendation. For example, if a revision was recommended and PRIT agreed with that recommendation, this would provide the USFWS the needed information to officially state they are embarking on a revision of the Recovery Plan. After that point, the ST could begin work on developing the new criteria. Another scenario would be that the ST determines that the recovery criteria are good as is. Under this scenario, if PRIT agreed with that recommendation, USFWS would announce that the recovery criteria are good as is and that they would not be embarking on a revision. DS and KG agreed with these formal steps as it would create an official record of the decision making process.

The CT discussed the concept and some members requested clarification on whether recovery criteria should be solely scientific or must they also be "achievable". DS referenced the S.M.A.R.T. criteria established in the Interim NMFS Recovery Planning Guidance. "Achievable" as referenced in the above guidance refer to criteria where the authority, funding, and staffing are technically feasible even if not always likely.

EF asked whether a revision of the recovery criteria would be considered a major revision of the Recovery Plan. LW confirmed that a revision of the recovery criteria would be considered a major revision of the plan and stated that that it would be the responsibility of USFWS to publish a draft plan for public comment. After that step, USFWS could then draft a final plan.

ACTION ITEM: DS will discuss with Kipp Frohlich the request from PRIT for the ST to have a decision by April on whether the ST will move forward with revising the recovery criteria.

INVENTORY AND MONITORING SUB-TEAM UPDATE

RB provided Inventory and Monitoring ST update and distributed latest drafts of the White Paper and Outreach Document. As agreed at October 2015 PRIT Meeting, the White Paper would remain a product of FWC as it was a preexisting FWC document. The new document would reference this fact. After incorporating comments from PRIT, the Minimum Known Alive method (retrospective mortality) was deleted. This was a substantial change as it caused a change in the overall range of panthers. It now references the last paragraph of paper for the lower end of range (based on the average of last 5 years of Rancher's Supply minimum count). The ST also made the White Paper consistent with the existing recovery criteria (use adults and subadults when referencing population size). The Outreach Document will be provided to outreach staff at FWC and USFWS and then back to the CT for additional review.

LW commended the quality of the products but expressed concerns that the first paragraph does not explicitly state what the Agencies think the numbers are. If we do not directly address the question of "How many panthers?" we lose ground because the public would think the agencies are hiding something. Some confusion when you see numbers in first paragraph that conflict with numbers presented in subsequent paragraphs (e.g., using the range established by the road kill analysis). RB stated that FWC will not change how it presents the number, but that PRIT can decide on what numbers should be presented. RB stated that the ST did discuss the option of including dependent-aged kittens in the range, but the scientists on the CT objected to this because the recovery criteria only include adults. LW stated that the agencies should provide a complete answer.

The ST discussed the merits of continuing the annual count conducted by Ranchers Supply and thought that continuing this count was still valuable in lieu of an acceptable technique producing a scientifically defensible a range-wide population estimate. LW stated that the Rancher's Supply Annual Count has been the right tool up to this point; however, the annual count is driving confusion and the Agencies need to move to a more defensible technique that more appropriately fits the increase in the population size. That said, the USFWS has no issues if an annual count is not produced for 1-2 years if the expectation was that a technique would be established to produce a range-wide population estimate. RB stated that the ST is not 100% confident that we are ready to move to the new technique currently being refined by Dr. Bob Dorazio.

ACTION ITEM: DS will provide RB contact information for FWS outreach staff in Regional Office.

ACTION ITEM: RB will ask Bob Dorazio if he could present at the next PRIT meeting on the progress on new modeling technique. This presentation and discussion would help inform PRITs decision on whether to continue Roy's annual count.

ACTION ITEM: RB will ask ST to consider the merits and scientific rigor of incorporating juveniles and a greater spatial extent for population range provided in FWC White Paper.

ACTION ITEM: RB will email Outreach Document to CT in order to provide any critical, big issue comments.

PRIT WORK PLAN DEVELOPMENT

Prior to beginning work planning exercise, LW announced that the prospects for NRCS PES grant are looking promising and that it would be a real accomplishment for PRIT and the other partners if the grant was awarded. KG stated that the PES project would require allocating a significant portion of Jen Korn (FWC) and Erin Myers (USFWS) time. LW stated that if the grant is awarded, PRIT should immediately begin advocating for full-funding.

CT conducted brainstorming exercise to identify and prioritize actions and products related to the 8 prioritized recovery actions that PRIT should focus on over the next 2-years. EF requested that habitat protection be included. Although this was not on original list, it would be incorporated for this work planning exercise.

Results of brainstorming exercise follows:

Private Lands:

- Continue exploring options for Safe Harbor Agreements north of the Caloosahatchee River.
- Continue exploring 10(j) options for range expansion north of the Caloosahatchee River.
- Further evaluate Dr. Elizabeth Pienaar's recommendations to develop programs north of the river.
- Develop staff capacity to work with landowners north of the river.

Recovery Criteria:

- If decision is made to revise recovery criteria, incorporate revised recovery criteria in a revised draft recovery plan that would be shared with the public for comment in 2 years.
- Have new recovery criteria that public and stakeholders support in 2 years.

Range Expansion:

- Propose 10(j) non-essential, experimental population in 2 years.
- Conduct assessment of panther habitat in the Southeast U.S. along with finalized Florida habitat assessment.
- Conduct social outreach on panther range expansion and potential 10(j) options.

Proposed Product: Pursue efforts to make panther recovery compatible with hunting and ranching.

ACTION ITEM: DS will provide CT copies of the statewide habitat map developed by Bob Frakes.

Habitat Management, Restoration, and Prey:

Proposed Product: Identify habitat management hotspots and make recommendations.

Proposed Product: Make panther recovery compatible with recreational access, including hunting.

Inventory and Monitoring:

- Goal to have a true population estimate (with improved margins of error) within 2 years
- Develop public outreach describing the change in population assessment methods.

Vehicle Mortality:

- Continue Transportation Sub-Team's work products.
- Proactive approach north of the river by tying Dan Smith's least cost pathways work with Frakes and Thatcher models to better inform decisions.

Proposed Product: Transportation Sub-Team complete compendium of crossing structures.

Proposed Product: Transportation Sub-Team complete identification of hotspots south of the river.

Taxonomy:

Proposed Product: Monitor advancements in puma genomic research and taxonomy.

Genetic Management Plan:

- Monitor prevalence and/or resurgence of deleterious traits that were symptomatic of inbreeding.
- Long-term need for genetic management plan.

Proposed Product: Convene panel to summarize state of puma taxonomy and genetics for PRIT.

CT was tasked with prioritizing 3 items on the list generated through previous exercise to further prioritize actions for next 2 years. The tasks were ranked by RB, LW, KG, EF, and TH as the following (RC out of room for discussion**):

1. Private Lands and 10(j)
2. Convene Panel on Taxonomy and Genetics
3. Recovery Criteria; Range Expansion Compatible with Access, Hunting, and Ranching; and Habitat Management and Restoration Compatible with Access, Hunting, and Ranching (TIE with 3)

It was expressed that the strict voting tally was not important. The concepts captured were the most important.

**DS discussed exercise and prioritized items with RC at end of meeting and RC stated that he agreed with the list as is.

ACTION ITEM: LW and DS will capture concepts and develop a short, draft work plan after soliciting KF and Tom Jones' input.

TEAM ROUND-TABLE AND PARKING LOT

EF requested further discussion on 10(j) vs 4d rule. DS will send EF 10(j) fact sheet that was distributed at August PRIT meeting.

Rancher Representative Vacancy on PRIT

CT discussed potential candidates for the Rancher Representative position and the desired attributes/qualifications that would be best suited for this position. The candidates considered by the CT included the following: Gene Lollis (MacArthur Agro-ecology Research Center at Buck Island Ranch), Alex Johns (Seminole Tribe of Florida), LeeAnn Adams-Simmons (Adams Ranch, Inc.), Joe Collins (Lykes Bros. Inc.), Jack Johnson (Rancher and Owner of Jack and Ann's Feed & Supply), Robert Jerome "Jerry" Flint (Rancher), Donnie Crawford (Rancher), Karen Hendry (Hendry Ranch), Jim Strickland (Strickland Ranch), and David "Lefty" Durando (Durando Ranch). Top three consensus candidates were: Gene Lollis, Alex Johns, and LeeAnn Adams-Simmons.

ACTION ITEM: DS will discuss full list of candidates with KF and TJ and determine if there is consensus with the Top 3 candidates.

ACTION ITEM: DS will send CT copy of Terms of Reference with recent changes incorporated and seek final approval from CT.

Panther Recovery and Game Populations

LW discussed recent communications he has had with sportsmen, including Mike Elfenbein. It is clear that we need to get together to talk about making panther recovery compatible with hunting. There are many facets to this issue, including concerns about panther impacts on recreational/ORV access and prey populations north and south of the Caloosahatchee River. The South Florida Deer Study is a good thing to have underway and Mike Elfenbein thought that a meeting to discuss this project and issues would be a good thing to do again, similar to what was done at the May 2015 ECC meeting in Davie, FL.

The CT discussed the merits of having another public workshop similar to October 2014 PRIT workshop. LW emphasized the importance of looking for ways to make hunting compatible with panther recovery, especially if the USFWS considers range expansion. Ranching, hunting, and land development interests are the major opposition to panthers. Private landowners are watching from north of river and we need to overcome the perception that panthers will shut down deer hunting. What are the 6 questions we want answered? Has panther recovery affected access? Has panther recovery affected game animals? Does panther presence change the dynamic of other predator interactions? Maybe the answer is to have the USFWS and/or PRIT organize and smaller group of sportsmen to seek input on these and similar questions. This group could consist of 6-10 people and specifically focus on the top 10 issues or questions that we need answers to.

ACTION ITEM: LW and DS will put together a proposal for a small meeting of sportsmen and agency personnel to discuss the issues above.

WRAP-UP AND ACTION ITEMS/NEXT STEPS

ACTION ITEM: DS will wait for RB to get feedback from Bob Dorazio and then send Doodle Poll for potential PRIT Meeting in Gainesville in April.

MEETING ADJOURNED