

Panther Recovery Implementation Team (PRIT)

Transportation SubTeam

Meeting Minutes

February 21, 2018

Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) District 1 Office, Bartow, FL

Attendees:

Katasha Cornwell
Amber Crooks
Elizabeth Fleming (phone), PRIT Liaison
Terry Gilbert (phone)
Darrell Land (phone)
Nancy Payton, Chair
Gwen Pipkin
David Shindle, FWS Staff Liaison
Don Scott (phone)
Brent Setchell
Dan Smith
John Wrublik (phone)

Other attendees:

Amy Causseaux, FDOT
Erica Christiansen, FDOT
Mark Easley
Jen Korn, Johnson Engineering
Shannon Ladd, Faller Davis and Associates
Gerlinde Masters, FDOT
Nicole Monies, FDOT
Bob Mrykalo, ESA Scheda
Tom Pride
Tobi Richey

Communications and Announcements

- Update from David
 - He is focused on 5 Year review and species status assessment.
 - Core team meeting that was scheduled in December was canceled. Meeting is scheduled in April, but will be Core team meeting only. The agenda will be to discuss the 5 year review/Species Status Assessment (SSA) and update to regulatory framework.
 - What role will the Core team and SubTeams have in the 5 year review/SSA review process? Transportation Subteam can provide information on future conditions, threats, and best available information.
- Update from Elizabeth

- Elizabeth mentioned final rule published on eastern cougar delisting. Elizabeth mentioned concerns about other potential legal petitions regarding delisting the Florida panther based on taxonomic reasons.
- Jen Korn updated the SubTeam about panthers north of the river. There is a second litter of kittens documented in Babcock. Most likely the first litter was lost.
 - David stated that the first known intraspecific aggression (IA) was documented north of the river.
- Nancy asked about current primary and secondary habitat designations changing in the FWS update? David said that Frakes has updated habitat information but it is limited in scope. They are utilizing Frakes to update habitat zones but also identifying breeding habitat north of the river.
- SubTeam announcements
 - Nancy Payton is retiring August 3. She may continue representing FWF after that and that is dependent on replacement hire.
 - There was a discussion about adding consultant(s) as members to the SubTeam. Elizabeth will coordinate, since that requires letter from FWS Regional Office.
 - Amber was nominated to replace Nancy as chair by Dan and seconded by Brent. Unanimous. New chair starts at the next meeting.
 - Nancy said that the main tasks of the chair are preparing agenda, running the meetings, and providing LeeAnn Kelso with notice and documents to add to the website.
 - A need for another person to take notes was identified, since it would be difficult to run the meeting and do minutes.
- Current and upcoming transportation projects
 - Federal infrastructure plans
 - Gwen and Elizabeth spoke about changes to NEPA. These changes would require bill successfully passing, which is yet to be determined.
 - SR31
 - There are three separate PD&E projects underway:
 - 1. SR80 to SR78 for the replacement of the existing Caloosahatchee Bridge.
 - 2. SR78 to the Charlotte County Line PD&E.
 - 3. From the County Line to Cook Brown Road (north of Babcock entrance) is a SIER.
 - It is our understanding that Babcock is supposed to pay for road improvements as part of their concurrency determination for item #3 (they also applied for a grant).
 - Jen Korn stated she believed Babcock didn't have to build panther crossings until traffic volume reaches a certain point.
 - Dan stated that a block of land still in private ownership at Bermont Road and 31 and would be good to get under easement or public ownership for conservation.
 - Gwen is going to discuss with project manager and to provide update to SubTeam in the future.
 - FDOT working on intersection improvements at CR74 and SR31.

- Arcadia SR31 extension project (from SR70 to US17). FDOT working on alternatives corridor report.
- Elizabeth asked about a sign she saw along I-75 indicating a potential new interchange near MM148 near the Collier-Lee line. Don says this is the Del Prado extension. The property owner (and also City of Cape Coral) that would like to see Del Prado extended to the interstate, but there are no plans in the works.
- Amber mentioned Alligator Alley repairs from Hurricane Irma since she saw a dead bobcat and also Nancy saw a bear at SR29. Brent reported that they just received the certification request for fence repair. Might be another few months for the fencing to be repaired.
 - There was a discussion about how wildlife (bear, deer, etc.) enter the I-75 Alligator Alley fencing near the SR29 interchange. The fencing south of I-75 along SR29 is not continuous.
 - Jen Korn mentioned that some of the panther crossings east of SR29 on I-75 are very wet and perhaps an impediment to panthers utilizing. FDOT had looked into fill dirt under wet crossings. Dan said some are really aquatic/hydrologic crossings, less practical for wildlife use. There was a discussion about adding shelves to some of these wet crossings to help facilitate use.
- Amber mentioned gap under fencing along Corkscrew Road. Perhaps up to 2 feet worth of gap at the bottom. It has also been reported to her that panthers have been crossing where fencing ends.

Alligator Alley Tolls

- The SubTeam looked closely at several Florida Statutes (FS. 338.162, 338.165, 373.45931, 338.26) and discussed opportunity to utilize tolls for wildlife improvements.
- FDOT staff has stated that they are planning a bond sale backed by the Alley revenues to support this program. They stated they are fully programmed and have no additional funding at this time. The project on the west coast is the interchange at I-75 and 951. The remainder were District 4 projects on the east coast.
- These funds can be utilized in the same county and doesn't need to be directly on I-75.
- Amber noted that the Florida Statutes noted that the funds be used for improving natural resource value (F.S. 338.26).
- Brent mentioned use of funds for fencing along North Belle Meade east of the toll booth.
- Amber suggested applying any available fund from this source for addressing Collier County hotspots (off-system improvements).
- Brent suggested that might best utilize toll funds if jobs are shovel ready. Sarah Catala would be a point of contact to request these projects to apply for these funds and get into the work program.

Cost Surface Mapping presentation by Dan

- Dan showed newest source/destination tweaks and results. Brent added 5 destinations and Amber asked to add Duette. Dan added Babcock Webb.
- There was a discussion about destination points. Dan said he was choosing points that could support panthers (around 10,000 acres minimum) even as a stop-over point.

- There was a suggestion by a member of the public to review the cost surface pathways against future land use. Amber mentioned use of 2070 projections.
- Elizabeth suggested ground-truthing using camera trap results and emphasized east-west connections.
- Dan will begin to draw up a methodology for future report.
- Darrell suggested identifying specific hotspots or segments that the SubTeam would focus where pathways intersect with roads. Perhaps 1km around these intersections.

Revisiting SubTeam's priorities and timelines

- Updating Hot Spots report
 - Send SubTeam's hotspots report to FDEP Division of State Lands.
 - Biggest changes from 2016 with the 2017 data:
 - Segment on CR846 and SR82 went to orange
 - Nancy will work on updating the HotSpots document including a new project data sheet for SR82, and SubTeam members can look at the edits to finalize at the next meeting.
- Finalizing road segments that intersect with least cost pathways ("crossing opportunities"). Dan's goal is to complete by mid-May.
- Identify improvements for bridges
 - Jen Korn stated that Fisheating Creek bridge shelves ledges exist and could add fencing there.
 - Brent is working with FDOT's bridge maintenance office to add new shelves (US17 over Thornton Branch, US17 Joshua Creek, SR31 Joshua Creek, US17 Alligator Branch, SR80 at Roberts Canal). Designs are complete; obtaining cost estimates and looking for funding.
- Design compendium. Brent says the FDOT ArcGIS is the same as this resource.
- Additional items from past discussions: RADS, bridge shelves, slow speed zones and other recommendations from Naples Zoo presentation, ongoing projects, and funding needs.
 - Dan said need funding for RADS improvements. FDOT said that there has been difficulty in finding contractor willing to take on liability issues.
 - Dan suggested having a presentation by Tim Hazelhurt of Crosstech Wildlife Solutions at an upcoming agenda. There was an interest in hearing what the new technologies are. Katasha stated that new products have to be reviewed by FDOT for consideration on the roadway and that there are protocols for bidding.
- Amber asked about role of SubTeam and providing our input/information with the Lee County traffic and corridor study. Nancy and Dan said that they provided some materials into the process.

Next meeting: May 10, 2018 at FDOT offices in Bartow (Multipurpose room) starting at 10am