

Panther Recovery Implementation Team (PRIT)

Transportation SubTeam

Meeting Minutes

August 15, 2018

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

Attendees:

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

Meredith Barnard, Florida Wildlife Federation
Kristin Caruso
Heather Chasez, FDOT
Virginia Creighton, FDOT
Niki Cribbs
Chris Dailey
Martin Horwitz, Florida Turnpike Enterprise
Jen Korn
Casey Lyon, FDOT
Wendy Matthews, TNC
Nicole Monies, FDOT
Bob Mrykalo
Lauren Peters, FDOT
Tom Pride
Nicole Selly, FDOT
Carlton Ward, Florida Wildlife Corridor

I-4 Permeability

Carlton Ward, Florida Wildlife Corridor

- Carlton discussed his experiences with the Florida Wildlife Corridor Expedition at I-4. Most recent Florida Wildlife Corridor expedition.
 - Drawing attention to this area and permeability between Green Swamp and Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge.
 - From seeing it on the ground, "it is not hopeless."
 - They crossed I-4 at Reedy Creek. It can prove to be a good area for permeability, particularly during the dry season. Jen Korn documented a bobcat crossing under I-4

at Reed Creek with a camera trap. Two male panthers have been killed along this stretch of I-4 within close proximity to the Reedy Creek Bridge. Approximately 1 mile of wildlife fencing on both sides of I-4 would help deter wildlife from entering the roadway.

- Past Reedy Creek crossing, going toward Disney golf course, the natural landscape was just a water hazard of a golf course.
- Lake Louisa State Park is gateway to Green Swamp. Needs conservation planning to protect this area. The projection for that area is rooftops. Need green infrastructure at those crossings in order to maintain them.
- Lands adjacent to US 27 (and SR 429) are a pervasive problem with strip development.
- Carlton says there is a vacuum of land trust activity in this area. The Nature Conservancy chapter in that area could be activated.
- Carlton was going to reach out to Disney about possible conservation measures Disney could assist with in their own backyard.
- Brent showed map that the Central Florida Expressway Authority prepared for the study area of Lake/Orange county connector road (US 27 to SR 429). The proposed roadway study area is also within a potential wildlife corridor connecting Disney (Reedy Creek to Lake Louisa State Park and the Green Swamp).
- Hilochee area in Polk City is a promising area for I-4 permeability. But Reedy Creek already has a bridge where it could be modified to add shelf.
- Davenport crossing (Champions Gate area) is already too built up.

Nicole Selly, FDOT District 7

- District 7 staff presented on the I-4 area in Hillsborough County.
 - 25 miles from I-275 interchange to Hillsborough/Polk county line.
 - Bypass canal preservation lands are located west of I-75.
 - One panther mortality located just east of I-75.
 - District 7 evaluated cross drains (28 - 9 of which are sized medium to large mammals).
 - Corridor improvements are not currently in 5-year work program
 - One culvert is close to greenways track east of I-75.
 - I-4 PD&E TBX Section 8 has potential for providing permeability. This project is not funded yet. Going to LDCA OEM for review in early 2019.
 - USFWS has not yet finalized coordination on this project.
- Dan Smith had identified Plant City crossing locations. He would like to work with them on culverts in that location.
- PD&E is wrapping up, so any potential crossings or permeability structures should be determined before moving into design.
- Brent suggested an opportunity for a wildlife corridor which would connect the SR 60 bridge over English Creek up to I-4 between Plant City and the county line. I-4 doesn't currently have a bridge or large culvert in this area, so if conservation lands would be acquired, there is an opportunity for a wildlife crossing.

Heather Chasez, FDOT District 5

- Most of District 5 of I-4 is under some kind of planning or construction.

- Segment 1
 - Has Reedy Creek shelves. Some limited work is moving forward but complete construction is not currently funded. Currently in design, working on 60% plans. Proposed shelves would be about 10 feet wide.
 - Carlton recommended fencing. Brent also suggested fencing at that location. Jen Korn said that Panther mortalities were within a half mile of the crossing area. Heather and Casey will look into what the constraints might have been as to why fencing wasn't previously contemplated.
 - This area gets very wet during the rainy season.
 - Disney comments are forthcoming.
 - Another ledge at Bonnet Creek considered.
- Segment 2
 - Is permitted. May be advertised for design/build later this year.
- I-4 "Ultimate"
 - Is in an urban area and is currently under construction.
- Segment 3
 - Funded for construction 2027. No underpasses considered. Too urbanized.
- Segment 4
 - Not currently funded. Contains aquatic crossing at Gemini Springs Park area.
- Volusia County segment
 - Construction completed in 2017 between SR 44 and I-95
 - Included elliptical culverts 34" X 48", and three 100 foot long bridges that are close to Alligator Alley size.
 - Showed a map of additional wildlife structures in the District as well. Dan reports that in this area of the state there could amount to over 50 wildlife crossings of all different sizes.

Communications

Elizabeth Fleming, Core Team Liaison

- No PRIT core team meeting since our last Subteam meeting.
- Transportation Subteam was requested to provide presentation at the next PRIT core team meeting which will be held October 10-11 in West Palm Beach.
 - The Transportation Subteam was requested to present on:
 - I-4 permeability
 - Cost surface mapping north of the Caloosahatchee River and how it can be applied
- USFWS is working on Species Status Assessment (SSA) for the Panther and 5-year status update.
- Meredith Barnard may be appointed to replace Nancy, who has agreed to continue to serve.

Subteam Members

- Amber seeking assistance with minutes, and also would like to have a designated (even if informal) vice chair in case of emergency/illness etc.

Cost Surface Mapping

- Update by Dan. He is working with Meredith to update land cover. In the Bone Valley area, current land cover just captures the whole area as mining, so they are working on digitizing the area.
- The first week of September, he hopes to be done with methods and results section writing. (Update: new target is mid-October.)
- Dan requests assistance with introduction and discussion part of the study, i.e. how to use the report, why it was done, the PRIT Transportation Subteam scope, etc.
- Amber, Meredith, and Nancy will draft; Brent can help with editing.
- GIS data will be part of the final product. Could include in the ETDM as a shapefile to use in assessment.
- The October core team presentation will show the pathways and explain how it was done, and will get further guidance.
 - Presentation will include description that the model is predictive based on habitat. Dan may thicken the line to help with visibility in the presentation.
- Future analyses (outside of the current scope) could be 1) identifying road segments of conflict and then prioritization, 2) comparing FEGN/Florida Forever with the pathways, 3) cross compare with FDOT plans/projects/bridges-infrastructure, 4) compare with 2070 population.
- Can be used as a planning level tool (whereas hot spots are planning and also remediation)

I-4 Permeability (cont.)

Martin Horwitz, Florida's Turnpike Enterprise

- Martin showed map of planned projects for future PD&E studies.
 - Purple area has bridge in the area of Shingle Creek wetlands, but is very urbanized and doesn't lead to much.
 - Green segment will be planned for 10 lanes. Haven't started PD&E yet.
 - Doesn't seem to be much opportunity in the area.
- There were other projects that were not included in the map, such as a PD&E study project on SR 528 (extending over St. John's River from SR 520 to Industry Rd. in Orange and Brevard counties). Current PD&E but is on hold. A previous PD&E study was completed by FDOT District 5 which included a wildlife crossing west of St. John's River and this will be included in the Turnpike PD&E study.
- The area of Turnpike near Three Lakes WMA has underpass (aka farm crossing) that is used by public lands managers and private landowners which could be used by wildlife. Dan may have information that would be helpful to that process.
 - Martin can share kmz of infrastructure with Brent.
- Also discussed connections east of I-75 near Chassahowitzka associated with wildlife crossings being constructed currently for Suncoast Parkway from US 98 to SR 44.
- South of 192 on Turnpike would be of interest to the Subteam.

Take always regarding I-4 discussion:

- Some of the road projects discussed are outside of USFWS Vero Beach coordination area (which handles much of the Florida panther issues). The Subteam encouraged that other USFWS field offices need to be involved in these issues.

- North-South roads (such as US 27 and FL 429) can actually be equally problematic as I-4. Future Subteam meetings will aim to look at these areas, as well (including SR 528).
- The opportunity to plan for many of these roadways is happening now or will be soon.
- Brent will be looking to host a design charrette to discuss shelf retrofit design within FDOT.
- The major opportunities at I-4 for continued discussion are (from east to west):
 - East of I-75 in Hillsborough County, I-4 TBX Section 8
 - Dan Smith identified Plant City area crossings
 - New crossing between Plant City and the Polk County line
 - Saddlecreek (aka Tenoroc) just east of Lakeland, between SR 33 and 570 (FWC and FWS seem to have pulled their support but appears to still be viable)
 - Eastern Green Swamp
 - Western Green Swamp (close to existing cattle crossing)
 - Reedy Creek (10 foot wide shelves planned; would like to have fencing added)
 - Bonnet Creek (ledge considered)
 - Volusia County between SR 44 and I-95 (existing)

Prep for October 10th Core Team meeting

- What has been accomplished to-date on I-4 and what the opportunities/challenges are.
- Discuss our findings on I-4 permeability, Dan's model, and SWFL hotspots revision.
 - Cost surface mapping: methodology, explaining difference between least cost and hotspots.
 - I-4 permeability: Crossings that have been done north of the Caloosahatchee River, FDOT summary of projects, focus on opportunities.
 - Katasha will coordinate a staff representative to be in attendance to give FDOT update on projects.
 - Future Subteam meetings to look at connection between south Florida and I-4.

Hotspots

- Can add more info about the green areas in the 2019 update.
- Recipient list will be updated.
- Can send updated documents to Larry Williams, USFWS.

Miscellaneous

- Nancy requested that all USFWS field office representatives participate in our meetings (Zakia Williams, Jacksonville and Mark Cantrell, Panama City).

Next meeting will be October 30, 2018 from 10am-3pm at FDOT offices in Bartow, FL.