http://www.tampabay.com/opinion/columns/conservation-banks-help-to-protect-florida-panthers/1076165

Conservation banks help protect panthers

By Nick Wiley and Paul Souza, Special to the St. Petersburg Times

Published Monday, March 1, 2010

Editor's note: A recent Times editorial concluded the way the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service preserved 4,000 acres of land east of Fort Myers as a "dispersal zone" for the Florida panther is only marginally useful. The agreement also allows the land's owners to sell preservation credits to developers building in the panther's actual habitat, or "primary zone."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) are pooling resources and expertise to protect Florida panthers and other wildlife. Conservation banking is among the innovative and promising strategies.

Conservation banks for endangered species have been successful in other places across the country. Banks set up a system where the private sector provides funds to preserve and manage important habitat … forever. Landowners can sell credits to developers planning to impact what are usually marginal habitats elsewhere, ensuring the most valuable habitats continue to flourish.

This system offers landowners an economic incentive to maintain and use the land in ways compatible with conservation. Fittingly, ranchers, who have been stewards of Florida's landscape for generations, can pass that legacy to their children and grandchildren.

The panther Primary Zone in Southwest Florida is where most panthers live, but not all land there is of equal value for panthers. Through the federal and state development-review processes and working proactively with landowners, we identify important wildlife resources and applicable conservation strategies to guide land-use decisions.

The Primary Zone includes 2.27 million acres; about 75 percent is permanently protected. Conserving the remaining high-value areas within the Primary Zone is extremely important, and banks serve a vital role. The service finalized a conservation bank in the Primary Zone, another is nearly complete, and seven others are under consideration.

The panther Dispersal Zone represents the only natural passageway from the Primary Zone to the Caloosahatchee River and panther habitat farther north. The Dispersal Zone is 28,000 acres — about 1 percent of the size of the

Primary Zone. Most of the Dispersal Zone is privately owned and not held for conservation. Recent completion of a panther bank in the Dispersal Zone is an important step in preserving a portion of this valuable area. Three additional banks in the Dispersal Zone are proposed.

The strategic importance of the Dispersal Zone is well known and became even clearer during the past few years. Male panthers transit this area en route to habitat in south-central Florida. Last year the FWC documented a female panther in the Dispersal Zone, just south of the Caloosahatchee River, within a mile of the recently finalized conservation bank. This was farther north than any female panther has been verified in decades and indicates a growing panther population — about 100 individuals today — compared with the 62 panthers tallied a decade ago and 20-30 estimated two decades ago.

The Florida Panther Recovery Plan, published in December 2008, noted that protecting panther habitat in Southwest Florida and finding ways to expand the population are important for the long-term recovery of the species. The proximity of the Dispersal Zone to the river makes the land desirable and expensive. A few years ago, property costs in this location made it appear unlikely that conservation alternatives such as banking were possible. For example, according to the landowners, the recently finalized Dispersal Zone conservation bank was nearly lost to development for that reason.

We will continue to work with counties, landowners and environmental groups to avoid and minimize impacts to wildlife and their habitats. Conservation banks are one more tool — along with land acquisition, habitat restoration, wildlife crossings and advances in science — that will serve a strategic role in our partnership to conserve and recover the majestic Florida panther and many other treasured parts of Florida's rich wildlife heritage.

Nick Wiley is the executive director of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Paul Souza is field supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service