

**Notice of Availability
Florida Panther Recovery Plan, Third Revision
Questions and Answers**

Q. What is a Recovery Plan?

A. Under the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is required to outline the goals and objectives that must be met to recover an endangered species. A recovery plan is a road map for how to reach species recovery. The plan released today is the third revision of the Florida panther recovery plan since it was first published in 1981.

Q. Who wrote this Recovery Plan?

A. The Recovery Plan was written by the Florida Panther Recovery Team and the South Florida Ecological Services Office of the Service. The 42 member Recovery Team consisted of representatives from two Indian Tribes, eight Federal agencies, nine State and county agencies, three major state universities, and 13 non-governmental organizations and private stakeholders.

Q. Why did the Service rewrite the Recovery Plan?

A. The last revision of the Recovery Plan was published in 1995. Since that time, additional scientific information has become available on the Florida panther, and a number of tasks identified in the 1995 Plan have been completed. To update the Plan and ensure it relies on the best scientific information, it was prudent for the Service to write and solicit comments on a third, updated revision. The updated Plan also includes recommendations identified by a Scientific Review Team (SRT) – an independent group of scientists convened by the Service and the State of Florida to evaluate Florida panther science. This revised Plan contains the best available science on the Florida panther.

Q. What does the Recovery Plan say?

A. The plan states that the Service will consider reclassification (i.e., consider the Florida panther threatened rather than endangered) when: 1) two viable populations of at least 240 individuals each have been established and maintained for 12 years and 2) sufficient habitat to support these populations is protected or secured in the long-term.

The Service will consider delisting the species when: 1) three viable, self-sustaining populations of at least 240 individuals each have been established and subsequently maintained for 12 years, and 2) sufficient habitat to support these populations is protected or secured in the long-term.

Q. How was the Recovery Plan changed during internal Service review?

A. The Recovery Plan did not substantively change during internal Service review. Specifically, the recovery criteria outlining the benchmarks for downlisting and delisting were not altered, however, interim benchmarks were added. The Service made minor changes to the plan to

reflect the tone and style that characterize agency documents. In addition, the Service reviewed other panther-related documents to ensure consistency and clarity. The Service also carefully considered and responded to the comments received during the public review process.

Q. What are the interim criteria and what is their purpose?

A. Due to the challenging nature of attaining the recovery criteria, an interim recovery goal has been established to assist in determining progress towards the ultimate goals of reclassification and delisting. This interim goal is to achieve and maintain a minimum of 80 individuals (adults and subadults) in each of two reintroduction areas within the historic range and to maintain, restore, and expand the south / south-central Florida subpopulation. The interim goal will be met when: (1) the south / south-central Florida panther subpopulation has been maintained, restored, and expanded beyond 80 to 100 individuals (adults and subadults), (2) two subpopulations with a minimum of 80 individuals each have been established and maintained within the historic range, and (3) sufficient habitat quality, quantity, and spatial configuration to support these three subpopulation is retained / protected or secured in the long-term.

Q. How will the Service achieve these goals?

A. Working with State and other Federal agencies, non-governmental organizations, and private landowners, the Service will focus on 4 strategies: (1) maintain the Florida panther population in south Florida, (2) expand the population into south-central Florida, (3) reintroduce at least two additional populations within historic range outside of south and south-central Florida, (4) engage in a public awareness and education program.

Q. How long will recovery take?

A. Panther recovery is a long-term proposition. It will take decades to achieve the goals outlined in the recovery plan. While it is an ambitious plan, it is based on sound science.

Q. Is the Service planning to reintroduce the panther?

A. Not at this time. The Service recognizes that reintroduction is critical to achieving full recovery of the species. However, due to lack of public awareness and acceptance, panther reintroduction is not feasible at this time. The Service will work closely with state partners, non-governmental organizations, and the public to identify areas with the potential for success before taking any steps to reintroduce the species.

Q. I've heard that the remaining Florida panther is really a Texas cougar?

A. One of the greatest threats to the Florida panther's recovery is reduced genetic diversity resulting from inbreeding. In 1995, to reverse the impacts of inbreeding and improve the health of the population, a program was initiated to restore genetic diversity. Eight female Texas pumas were brought into the Florida panther population. Approximately 20% of the genetic makeup of the present Florida panther population can be traced to the Texas animals. Since this introgression, rates of genetic defects, including crooked tails and cowlicks, have dramatically

decreased. In addition, to date neither atrial septal defects nor cryptorchidism have been found in introgressed panthers. The panther population has almost quadrupled. This program has been extremely successful using genetic science. All introduced Texas pumas were removed from the wild in 2003. The Florida panther remains listed as a subspecies and continues to receive protection pursuant to the ESA.