

# **MEDIA ADVISORY**

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## **U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE RESPONDS TO PETITIONS TO DESIGNATE FLORIDA PANTHER CRITICAL HABITAT; MEDIA TELECON SET FOR 1 P.M. TODAY**

VERO BEACH, Fla. -- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) today notified the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, the Sierra Club, the Center for Biological Diversity and other petitioners it will not designate critical habitat for the endangered Florida panther at this time.

“While we denied the petitions, we informed the petitioners that the Service retains the discretion to designate critical habitat for the Florida panther in the future, if we subsequently determine that designating critical habitat is in the best interest of the Florida panther’s conservation and recovery,” said Paul Souza, Field Supervisor of the Service’s South Florida Ecological Services Office.

Critical habitat isn’t required under the Endangered Species Act because the Service has discretion whether to designate critical habitat for species like the panther that were listed prior to the 1978 amendments to the Act. The Service denied the petitions as it continues to focus on the following priorities:

- Implementing the Florida Panther Recovery Plan;
- Working with partners to implement important initiatives such as the Picayune Strand Restoration Project, an essential part of the Everglades Restoration Plan;
- Evaluating the viability of the proposed Florida Panther Protection Program, a collaboration between private landowners and environmental agencies designed to protect some 150,000 acres of prime land in south Florida that could benefit panther conservation efforts;

- Continuing important reviews under Section 7(a)(2) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of proposals that “may affect” the panther and areas where they’re found;
- Establishing conservation banks for panthers, which is a promising approach to protect, restore and manage in perpetuity strategically important Florida panther habitat;
- Implementing Florida panther crossings across key segments of roads in south Florida; and
- Improving the scientific understanding of Florida panthers and their habitats.

“We believe our current strategy and priorities are the best paths forward at this time,” said Souza. “Florida panther habitats will continue to receive all protections under the ESA without this designation. We’re fully committed to working with our partners to conserve and recover the highly endangered Florida panther – one of our greatest conservation challenges.”

In addition, Audubon of Florida, the Collier County Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife and the Florida Wildlife Federation have made it clear that they are supporting another approach to Florida panther conservation other than critical habitat at this time – namely the Florida Panther Protection Program with private landowners as referenced above.

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**Editors’ Note: Paul Souza will be available to discuss this decision with reporters via teleconference today at 1 p.m. (EST). To participate in the teleconference please call (866) 860-9882. The pass code is 7003251. To see a copy of the letter sent to the petitioners and other information go to: <http://www.fws.gov/verobeach/> and click on “Florida Panther Critical Habitat News.”**