

Draft Position Statement

Florida Panther Recovery and Management: Strategic Priorities

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has served a leadership role in the recovery and management of the Florida panther throughout the 47 years it has been classified as endangered. FWC has worked diligently with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and other partners under the provisions of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Florida Panther Recovery Plan which was first implemented in 1981 and updated several times, most recently in 2008. FWC has supported panther recovery strategies and criteria established in the federal recovery plan, resulting in major successes through a substantial investment of time and resources.

While a number of efforts have been taken to promote the recovery of the Florida panther, the most significant action has been the successful genetic restoration undertaken in the late 1990s. The temporary introduction (1995-2003) of female Texas cougars into the population has increased genetic diversity, individual health and survival, and reproductive rate. This effort also has contributed to a significant increase in panther populations in South Florida leading to higher levels of conflict between people and panthers. As a result, there is a renewed sense of interest and urgency surrounding the recovery and management of panthers in Florida. It is timely for FWC to review and refocus the agency's role in panther conservation efforts to ensure the agency's limited resources are well aligned to address the state of Florida's most pressing strategic priorities related to panther conservation. This position statement provides guidance and direction from FWC Commissioners in this regard. It establishes policy guidance and strategic priorities for redefining and refocusing FWC's role in panther conservation in consideration of the following key factors:

- the current status of panther populations relative to the federal panther recovery plan and realistic options for panther recovery going forward;
- the reasonable level of responsibility and burden the state should accept for panther recovery and management with regard to the federal recovery plan;
- the need to identify and align the highest priority management and research needs within the scope of FWC's authorities and responsibilities;
- the most cost effective use of agency fiscal and staff resources; and
- maintaining broad public support for panther conservation among Florida citizens, particularly those who live closest to established panther populations.

Carrying Capacity

Great progress in recovering panther populations has been achieved since the Florida panther was first listed as endangered in 1967 when population levels were estimated as low as 30 animals or less. As of 2014, indicators of panther population growth suggest as many as 180 adult panthers exist in southwest Florida. While this estimate covers public and private lands, it does not benefit from comprehensive surveys of extensive primary and secondary panther habitat on private lands. This population level exceeds interim recovery goals, but more importantly a number of indicators (mortality causes, home range sizes, depredation records, abundance of prey species, human encounters, reports from landowners, photographic evidence, etc.) suggest that Florida panther populations have most likely exceeded carrying capacity for their occupied range in southwest Florida. At this level, panther populations are straining and currently exceed the tolerance of landowners, residents and recreationists in the region. While successful recovery efforts should be

recognized, FWC also must consider how this success changes the historic dynamics of panther conservation particularly regarding agency priorities and responsibilities relative to those of the USFWS and other partners.

Panther recovery success in southwest Florida is clearly escalating management challenges and the demand for staff time to address these challenges. Growing numbers of this wide ranging apex predator have resulted in substantial increases in human-panther conflicts, more depredation of pets and livestock, more road mortalities, more panther encounters in residential areas, and more public concern regarding coexistence with panthers. This situation will continue to demand focused management attention within the current core population in south Florida and in turn will constrain FWC's ability to focus on other agency priorities. Balancing the needs and impacts of panther recovery, better aligning state and federal responsibilities in the wake of our success and maintaining broad public support for panther conservation will be crucial as we move forward.

Concerns associated with panther carrying capacity also amplify the need to restore and manage traditional habitat and prey base on publicly owned conservation lands. For example, periodic high water events across the expansive Everglades landscape have resulted in a significant loss of wildlife diversity and in particular dramatic reductions in white-tailed deer populations, the primary prey for panthers. Over 600,000 acres of traditional panther habitat have been mostly abandoned by panthers due to these impacts of periodic high water events since the 1970's. FWC telemetry data tracking panther movements documents a complete withdrawal from the Water Conservation Areas by panthers over the past 30 years. In contrast, private landowners within panther range are often asked to do more for panther recovery while their lands already provide some of the most important habitat for panthers. Reclaiming, restoring and managing quality habitat and prey base for panthers on public conservation lands should be high priorities for state and federal agencies when developing future management and operational plans.

Population Recovery

A review of panther population indicators clearly shows a long term (20 year) sustained positive trend in population recovery since genetic restoration was implemented in 1995. While such a sustained recovery should be ample scientific evidence to warrant reconsideration of the status of panthers under ESA, this is not the case due to how the Florida panther federal recovery plan is framed. The federal recovery plan stipulates that meeting the criteria for reclassification from endangered to threatened could be accomplished within 30 years, and delisting could be accomplished within 45 years. It has now been almost 34 years since the initial recovery plan was implemented. While we have achieved great success recovering panther populations in southwest Florida, there has been essentially no progress in meeting the broader range-wide recovery criteria, particularly establishing two additional viable populations of at least 240 panthers (adults and subadults), which requires establishment of breeding populations in central/north Florida and/or other southeastern states.

After careful consideration of panther recovery criteria in the context of almost 34 years of effort and experience, FWC has concluded that the current population recovery criteria are not helpful in guiding management and research planning in the near term. The current recovery criteria are aspirational rather than practical in nature and they are unfeasible for a number of reasons, many of which are presented as significant challenges in the current federal recovery plan. Moreover, the lack of progress in establishing additional panther populations outside of south Florida places the greatest burden for managing panther recovery on the state of Florida and FWC. Under this federal recovery plan, Florida will never be able to

accomplish the goals necessary to recover panther populations to a point where the subspecies can be delisted. This situation places Florida in the untenable position of managing a growing panther population under the rigid provisions of the ESA without sufficient tools or flexibility to address management challenges which may result in erosion of public support for panther conservation

It is imperative for the USFWS to fully recognize the success of panther recovery efforts in south Florida and take leadership responsibility for implementing new and innovative management measures. The Florida Panther Recovery Implementation Team is a step in the right direction, but there must be a greater sense of urgency in their pace of work. Additionally, the USFWS rather than FWC should lead any efforts to establish additional breeding populations of panthers north of the Caloosahatchee River beyond natural range expansion.

Conclusion

Given that recovery criteria in the current recovery plan are not feasible, coupled with the understanding that panther populations are most likely exceeding carrying capacity in currently available habitats in southwest Florida, there is a clear need for significant changes in FWC's focus relative to panther conservation. FWC should focus management efforts on maintaining the population at a sustainable level and appropriate coexistence with people in the core population south of the Caloosahatchee River and Lake Okeechobee. The primary basis for refocusing FWC's role is to demonstrate the agency's commitment to addressing current and emerging panther management challenges where panthers are well established. Success in this area is essential for maintaining public confidence and support for panther conservation and will only be possible if FWC and the USFWS can demonstrate the ability to manage current core panther populations in balance with the needs and interests of stakeholders and within the parameters of the ESA.

FWC's refocused approach to panther conservation should include the following elements to guide allocation of FWC's management and research staff and resources:

1. Focus management and research activities on addressing the panther management challenges within the core breeding population south of the Caloosahatchee River and Lake Okeechobee;
2. Place greater emphasis on addressing human-panther conflicts to continually reassure the public that panthers are being managed in a manner that places public safety first and foremost;
3. Place greater emphasis on addressing/minimizing panther depredation;
4. Place greater emphasis on restoring lost or degraded panther habitat on publicly owned conservation lands and as part of future ecosystem restoration efforts;
5. Place greater emphasis on supporting incentives for private landowners to maintain panther habitat;
6. Align research activities with refocused management priorities and employ the latest technologies including an accelerated transition from aerial telemetry to satellite telemetry wherever feasible, trail cameras, and other innovative techniques that improve effectiveness and safety; and
7. Given the current federal recovery plan calls for establishing breeding populations of panthers north of the Caloosahatchee River, any efforts to achieve this outcome beyond natural range expansion, is the responsibility of the USFWS. FWC will not provide direct staff and funding to support such efforts until issues with private lands, regulatory burdens, and human acceptance have been resolved. Successful expansion of breeding panther populations in Florida will require

that FWC has meaningful and practical management flexibility along with clear options on federal regulatory issues north of the Caloosahatchee River.

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