

Florida Panther Recovery Implementation Team Meeting Summary

July 22-23, 2014
Vero Beach, FL

The meeting began with an introduction of our new FL Panther Recovery Implementation Team member, Todd Hallman, and invited guests, Carol Knox (FWC) and Erin Myers (USFWS). The purpose of this meeting was to discuss plans for building relationships with landowners and moving forward with establishing incentive options through the PES effort, safe harbor agreements, and other opportunities.

As the Team's newest member, Todd represents the perspective of hunters and sportsmen/sportswomen on panther conservation and recovery issues. Todd serves as President of the FL Sportsmen's Conservation Association, Board Member of the Future of Hunting in FL, and he plays a central role in the Sportsman's Trust Group that works to build trust between the sporting community and conservation agencies. Todd kicked off the meeting by presenting an informative overview of the history of hunting/sporting issues in FL with regard to the FL panther. Having access to hunt on public lands is one of the key challenges to the hunting and sporting community in south Florida.

Kevin mentioned that the Service is currently revising the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the FL Panther National Wildlife Refuge, and hunting on the Refuge will be addressed during that process. The Refuge is currently undergoing the public scoping phase for the CCP revision. Ron mentioned that Big Cypress National Preserve is updating its hunt plan for the Addition Lands.

Payment for Ecosystem Services Concept

Kevin will revise the June PES draft document to remove the language suggesting that the payment is a cost share because that is confusing. It is a direct payment, but the values for the payment were calculated using a cost-share formula. There has been concern expressed from some landowners that the payment is not as much as what NRCS provides, or that we might not follow up with landowners who enroll in the PES if they experience problems with panthers. Kevin and Dawn are meeting with the NRCS State Conservationist and staff on July 29th to discuss the PES in relationship to their programs, particularly EQIP. The PES incentive to landowners is intended to address one of the five major threats to the panther as described in the ESA (see ESA Factor A – the present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of [the species'] habitat or range). Given that panthers are extremely habitat limited in southwest FL, this incentive to maintain and improve native habitat will help to reduce that threat. Team members will be advocating for funding for the pilot PES and will reach out to private partners. Dawn will contact the Turner Foundation to discuss possible funding opportunities.

Alternative Options Matrix

Dawn revised the Alternative Options document to incorporate stakeholder comments and clarify some of the language. The revised document is posted on the Recovery Team's website. In response to comments received, the Service is moving forward with developing a draft document that could serve as an umbrella FL Panther Safe Harbor Agreement for landowners north of the River who are interested in participating as Cooperators to the Agreement. The Service is also working on developing Partners for Fish and Wildlife Agreements for landowners specifically to provide technical assistance for FL panther habitat management/improvement activities. These agreements would not provide funding, but would be a mechanism to provide regulatory coverage to landowners for any panthers incidentally taken during implementation of beneficial habitat management activities.

Other Possible Incentives

Kipp and Laurie both attended the recent Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) national meeting where they learned what other agencies and organizations are doing to provide incentives for private landowners who have endangered species issues. One incentive is a direct payment to landowners who can document the presence of certain endangered species on their lands. As an example, Laurie mentioned that Defenders of Wildlife pays \$500 for anyone who can provide a photograph of a jaguar on their lands. The Team could consider such an incentive for landowners north of the Caloosahatchee River for documentation of a female panther or kittens. In addition, they learned of a partnership that the Service has with NRCS in Arizona to work with landowners. Dawn will follow up with Service contacts for more information about that. Another idea that came from the SCB meeting was to inform FL landowners about the Blackfoot Challenge – a landowner-based group in Montana that works together on management issues of the Blackfoot River and adjacent lands: <http://blackfootchallenge.org/Articles/> Kevin offered to talk with the Refuge Association for possible financial assistance for FL landowners to visit there, learn about their issues, and participate in demonstrations and discussions.

Stakeholder Forum Follow up

Team members will contact landowners who attended the Forum to have additional, more detailed conversations about the PES, Safe Harbor Agreements and Partners for Fish and Wildlife Agreements, either individually or in small group settings. We are looking for feedback about which option, if any, landowners would prefer.

One of the written comments we received at the Forum was an invitation for one of us to “go out and do what the ranchers do” so we can better understand the problems that they deal with. In response to that comment, Dawn sent an email to Forum attendees that Team members were willing to visit with whomever was interested, and we received a few replies! Dawn shared her (awesome) experience on the JB Ranch. She will resend an email to Forum attendees to remind them of this opportunity.

Citizen Science Opportunities

The Team discussed the advantages of involving the public in on-the-ground panther activities (livestock depredation visits, checking camera traps, etc.) as well as a statistically-sound project to estimate panther density. The FWC is currently completing a protocol for how such a study could work (using an expanded camera grid for mark/recapture of panthers) if it were to be conducted on private lands. The Team suggested holding a workshop, likely the end of October, to discuss how we are estimating the panther population size, and offer opportunities for private landowners in southwest FL to get involved in this study.

Recovery Implementation Team Structure

Larry talked to Team members about his vision of the ultimate structure of the entire Recovery Implementation Team. The current Team members should start transitioning to an oversight or advisory role – to serve more like a steering committee. We need to establish additional groups to conduct the majority of the work on the 8 priority action items. The Team also decided that the term “Working Group” was preferable to the term “Subteam” for additional appointed members.

After discussing the action items, the Team suggested that the issue of panther range expansion should be addressed by the next appointed Working Group. That group will be diverse because they will work on recommending landscape connectivity in south central Florida as well as on the human dimensions component of an expanding panther population. The Team will be discussing nominations for that new working group over the next couple of months.

In addition, the Population Subteam will be expanded with additional members who have working knowledge of statistics, mark/recapture techniques, population density and population size estimation. That subteam name will change to the Inventory and Monitoring Working Group. Robin will take the lead on recommending members to nominate for that working group.

The oversight team and the working groups will need to have a Terms of Reference, or charter, to outline their responsibilities as advisors to the Service’s Regional Director.

FWC Commission Meeting

To end the meeting, Kipp gave a very brief overview of the “Panther Update” session at the June Commission meeting. This was the third panther update in the last three years. The commissioners provided positive comments to FWC staff and suggested no changes to the way staff are working on panther issues.

Next Meeting: Tentatively scheduled for October 27-28 in southwest Florida (location TBD). The proposed public workshop would likely be held the afternoon of the 28th. Kevin offered to provide a tour of the FL Panther National Wildlife Refuge following the workshop.