Draft Position Statement – August 11, 2015
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 were taken over the past decades to promote the recovery of the Florida panther, the most significant action was the successful genetic restoration undertaken in the late 1990's. The temporary introduction (1995-2003) of female Texas cougars into the population has increased genetic diversity, individual health and survival, and reproductive rates. This effort also contributed to a significant increase in the panther population in South Florida leading to higher levels of interaction between people and panthers as represented by more vehicle mortality, higher depredation on domestic animals, and increased sightings in nontraditional settings. 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 is important to note that the Florida panther is listed as an endangered species under the federal authority of the Endangered Species Act. This position paper is not intended to and does not change the existing listing status or any associated legal protections for Florida panthers.*** It does establish policy guidance and strategic priorities for focusing FWC's role in panther conservation in consideration of the following key factors:

- the need to consider the current status of panther populations relative to the federal panther recovery plan and realistic options for panther recovery going forward;
- the need to consider the reasonable level of responsibility the state/FWC 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 for panthers within the scope of FWC's authorities and responsibilities;
- the need to clarify and identify the most cost effective use of agency fiscal and staff resources; and
- the need to maintain broad public support for panther conservation among Florida citizens, particularly those who live closest to established panther populations.

Population

Great progress in recovering the panther population has been achieved since the Florida panther was first listed as endangered in 1967 when the population level was 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 (SWFL). 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. A number of indicators (mortality causes, home ranges, depredation records, human encounters, reports from landowners, photographic evidence, etc.) suggest that Florida panther populations have fully occupied all available panther habitat in SWFL. While successful recovery efforts should be recognized, FWC also must consider how this success changes the dynamics of panther conservation moving forward, particularly regarding FWC priorities and responsibilities relative to those of the USFWS and other partners. Panther recovery success to this point has benefited from a collaborative partnership approach among agencies, landowners and NGOs. As panther management challenges expand and become more complex, further progress will require a more clear understanding and prioritization of each partner's roles and responsibilities.

Panther recovery success in SWFL is increasing the scope and complexity of management challenges. Greater resources are required to effectively respond to human-panther conflicts such as panthers in residential areas and increasing depredations. These newer responsibilities are in addition to the continuing need for population monitoring and ongoing research. This situation will continue to demand focused management attention within the current core population in SWFL. Balancing the needs and implications 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.

Another challenge associated with panther population growth is the serious need to restore and manage the traditional habitat and prey base on publicly owned conservation lands. Given that panthers are already occupying all available habitat in SWFL and population levels have not reached the recovery goal, it is important to make certain large areas of public lands that historically supported panthers are restored and managed to provide suitable panther habitat today and in the future. For example, periodic high water events across the expansive Everglades landscape have resulted in a significant loss of wildlife diversity including dramatic reductions in white-tailed deer populations, the primary prey for panthers. Since the 1970's, over 600,000 acres of traditional panther habitat generally known as the Everglades Water Conservation Areas have been mostly abandoned by panthers due to reduced prey associated with periodic high water events. This situation is highlighted by over 30 years of FWC telemetry data tracking movements and habitat use of radio-collared panthers. In 2013, FWC approved a position paper identifying hydrologic conditions on specific public conservation lands in south Florida essential for restoring wildlife diversity in the Everglades. Implementation of the recommendations from this paper would lay the groundwork for restoring panther habitat across major portions of the Everglades landscape and should be endorsed and supported by all stakeholders who value the Florida panther as an important component of Everglades restoration. Reclaiming, restoring, and managing quality habitat and prey base for panthers on

public conservation lands should be high priorities for state and federal agencies as they manage lands today and when developing future management and operational plans.

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. This positive trend is particularly noteworthy given the growth in the number of people living in south Florida over the same period of time. It has now been almost 34 years since the initial recovery plan was implemented. While we have achieved great success increasing panther populations in SWFL, there has been limited 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 more than 30 years of effort and experience, FWC is concerned that the current recovery criteria are insufficient to effectively guide panther management and research in the near term. A significant body of scientific information has been published since these criteria were established, and a number of important research projects are in progress with new findings being released. Moreover, the lack of progress in establishing additional panther populations outside of SWFL places the greatest burden for managing panther recovery on the state of Florida and FWC. Under the current recovery plan, Florida will not be able to accomplish the goals necessary to recover panther populations to a point where they fully reach recovery goals and can be delisted. This situation places Florida in the untenable position of managing a growing panther population under the rigid provisions of the ESA and a recovery plan which in current form may not be achievable.

Given that the Florida panther is listed as endangered under the ESA, the USFWS is the lead agency for panther recovery, has primary regulatory authority, and makes final decisions regarding panther recovery planning. In recognition of the above referenced concerns regarding recovery criteria, the USFWS agreed to move forward with a recovery plan revision process as a task of the Florida Panther Recovery Implementation Team. This is a step in the right direction, but FWC would like to see a greater sense of urgency in the pace of this work. FWC supports and encourages a more expedited revision process that considers current and emerging science; focuses more on the importance of positive, sustained population recovery trends; and more directly addresses the current challenges for panther recovery such as availability of suitable contiguous habitat.

FWC understands that full recovery and delisting of the Florida panther under the current recovery plan would require establishment of additional breeding populations outside of south Florida and possibly into other southeastern states. FWC recognizes that expansion or establishment of breeding panther populations will be challenging, controversial, and will take a significant commitment of time and funding. The State of Florida and FWC has clearly demonstrated support for panther conservation through our concerted efforts for more than

50 years and will support efforts to move panther recovery forward in the future. However, it is important at this stage, given the need to focus FWC resources on the current breeding population in SWFL, that the USFWS lead this process forward and provide the resources and funding necessary to take the next steps in expanding panther populations outside of SWFL.

FWC recognizes that the USFWS has the authority under ESA to make final decisions regarding how and where panther populations may be expanded or established and that this process will need to be implemented one step at a time. The first step should be a robust and comprehensive evaluation of habitat suitability for breeding populations north of the Caloosahatchee River including other southeastern states as required by the recovery plan. FWC understands that natural range expansion from the current breeding population north of the Caloosahatchee River may occur in the near future. FWC and USFWS are working with stakeholders on this issue, but there is a need for the USFWS to take a stronger role and provide more clarity, certainty, assurances, and incentives regarding the implications of having breeding panthers in this part of Florida. The importance of pursuing mechanisms to incentivize and compensate landowners for providing panther habitat such as payment for ecosystem services and conservation easements cannot be overstated and should be a top priority. FWC supports moving these efforts forward in a more expedited manner as well.

Conclusion

Given the current and emerging challenges associated with panther recovery and management efforts, it is important for FWC to have clear priorities guiding our role in panther conservation. FWC will focus management efforts on maintaining the SWFL panther population at a sustainable level as supported by available habitat and addressing the challenges associated with human-panther coexistence. The primary basis for focusing FWC's role in this manner 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; this will only be possible if FWC and the USFWS can demonstrate the ability to address these management challenges associated with core panther populations under the parameters of the ESA. ***This policy guidance regarding FWC focus priorities is intended to strengthen cooperative panther recovery and conservation and does not reduce the FWC's commitment to protecting panthers as provided under current laws.*** FWC will focus on the following panther conservation 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/minimizing human panther conflicts and panther depredation including efforts to educate and empower citizens to assist with panther management to develop a larger network of people to recognize, report, and respond to encounters between panthers and people, or panthers and livestock;

3. Place greater emphasis on restoring lost or degraded panther habitat on publicly owned conservation lands;

4. Continue to coordinate with the Florida Department of Transportation to prioritize needs for and install wildlife/panther road crossings accordingly based on the best available science regarding panther movements and collisions with vehicles;

5. Place greater emphasis on supporting incentives for private landowners to maintain panther habitat including support for strategic conservation easements; and

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.