

MEETING NOTES
Florida Panther Recovery Implementation Team Meeting
USGS Wetland and Aquatic Research Center
7920 NW 71st Street
Gainesville, FL 32653
April 7, 2016 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Attendance:

PRIT Core Team: Larry Williams (USFWS), Kevin Godsea (USFWS), Robin Boughton (FWC), Kipp Frohlich (FWC), Ron Clark (National Park Service), Tom Jones (Barron Collier Companies), Todd Hallman (Florida Sportsmen's Conservation Association), Gene Lollis (MacArthur Agro-ecology Research Center), and Elizabeth Fleming *via phone* (Defenders of Wildlife)

PRIT Transportation Sub-Team: Darrell Land (FWC), Amber Crooks (Conservancy of Southwest Florida)

PRIT Inventory and Monitoring Sub-Team: Darrell Land (FWC), Carol Knox (FWC), Robert Dorazio (USGS), and Dave Onorato *via phone* (FWC)

Florida Panther Coordinator: David Shindle (USFWS)

Invited Guests: Robert Kawula (FWC) and Paul Schueller (FWC)

Larry Williams (LW) opened meeting with the introduction of Gene Lollis (GL) as the recently appointed Rancher Representative on the PRIT Core Team (CT). LW provided an overview of the grant recently awarded to USFWS and FWC from the National Resources Conservation Service's Regional Conservation Partnership Program. This grant will be used to implement a pilot project for the Payment for Ecosystem Services concept. The grant request was initially for \$630,000, but NRCS recently announced that the grant award amount was reduced to approximately \$400,000 for the pilot project.

TRANSPORTATION SUB-TEAM UPDATE

Elizabeth Fleming (EF) provided summary of the Transportation Sub-Team meeting on March 31, 2016 (see <http://www.fws.gov/verobeach/FloridaPantherRITTransportation.html>). This meeting included a presentation from Tim Tetzlaff (Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens) on a proposal from the Naples Zoo to fund an outreach campaign directed to reduce panther roadkills and raise public awareness through billboards, social media campaigns, "Your Speed is.." radar signs, and off-duty officers. This meeting also included a report from Dan Smith on the status of the RADS project and the fact that its system is not performing well and that FDOT is considering moving the system from its current location on US41 in Big Cypress National Preserve to a new location (to be determined). Ken McDonald (USFWS) was invited by the sub-team to speak about the Eastern Collier Habitat Conservation Plan and associated EIS process. Also had presentation about local, state, and federal funding opportunities for wildlife crossing structures and associated fencing.

Sub-team will be providing a recommendation to examine fee or payment system to address the average daily trips generated by development projects that could be contributing to panther mortality as a means to mitigate these impacts. These alternative funding sources could be in the form of an impact fee or fee based on average daily trips. The caracara fund was used as an example for funding provided through Sections 7 or 10 for indirect effects. Dan Smith is continuing his work on the cost-surface/least costs pathways mode and is close to having a final product.

Sub-team has made efforts on its "hot spot" prioritization work and that this work is feeding into the current review of the SR29 widening project. A recommendation was made to encourage Sub-Team to refine their priority list and provide a framework for agencies to make those decisions when the opportunity arises. The preference would be that this would be a sub-team product as opposed to a single agency pushing for these improvements.

ACTION: Transportation Sub-Team will produce a prioritized map/list of southwest Florida hotspot road segments with potential wildlife feature locations identified and present this information for discussion at the next CT meeting.

RECOVERY CRITERIA SUB-TEAM UPDATE

Kipp Frohlich (KF) provided an update on the Recovery Criteria Sub-Team. Sub-Team has conducted five meetings to-date, all via phone and/or webinar. Topics of webinars included “Recovery 101”, background of the 240 metric used in the existing recovery criteria, recent polar bear recovery planning efforts, and population modeling efforts undertaken since the 2008 Recovery Plan. The Sub-Team convened a conference call on March 29th to seek consensus on whether revisions to the current recovery criteria were merited. A consensus was reached to move forward and a face-to-face meeting will be scheduled in May to begin working out the specific details of the potential recovery criteria revisions. KF reiterated that it was not the sub-team’s charge to recommend to the Service that the recovery plan should be revised with the modified recovery criteria. That recommendation would be at the discretion of the CT. KF highlighted the fact that the habitat component of the existing recovery criteria is rarely talked about and that this threats-based component will be reported on as well. Robert Dorazio (RD) asked if the sub-team members viewed habitat as not just the physical habitat, but also the prey component. KF stated that the sub-team considers both as components of habitat. RD provided an example from tiger research in India where it’s assumed that the tiger population is only influenced by the size of the habitat, but in reality the tiger population is influenced by the poaching of tiger prey.

ACTION: An update on the Recovery Criteria Sub-Team progress will be presented at the next CT meeting.

INVENTORY AND MONITORING SUB-TEAM UPDATE

Robin Boughton (RB) provided a brief introduction on the revised Outreach Document and FWC White Paper, including the request from the January PRIT meeting to add juveniles and panthers north of Caloosahatchee River to the population numbers. RB noted that the area of reference for these documents was changed from the Primary Zone (Kautz et al. 2006) to the area delineated in the Frakes et al. (2015) manuscript. RB noted that no sub-team meetings had taken place and that all correspondence between sub-team members was done via email.

RD gave a presentation on the “Use of Statistical Models to Estimate Panther Population Size” (see <http://www.fws.gov/verobeach/FloridaPantherRIT.html> for PDF).

Revisions to FWC White Paper and Outreach Document

RB provided the background and justification behind the outreach document and white paper to bring Gene Lollis (GL) up-to-speed on the issue. A point was made that there may be an issue with the timing of the Outreach Document given that the methodology used for the White Paper, specifically changes related to incorporating the Frakes et al. (2015) zone and the requested inclusion of juvenile panthers and known panthers north of the Caloosahatchee River. An explanation was provided by Darrell Land (DL) on how the Frakes Zone was buffered to smooth out the “Swiss cheese effect” and to smooth out the perimeter of the boundary in order to capture secondary sources of data (e.g., known roadkills of females/kittens that have been documented outside of the boundaries delineated by Frakes).

KF emphasized that the 2nd to the last paragraph has not been fully-vetted and that FWC leadership still needs scientists to provide the explanation and justification behind those changes. The challenges are that there is an existing document available to the public (FWC White Paper), the draft revision has not been approved, and the current draft of the Outreach Document refers to the draft revision of the White Paper. In our efforts to provide transparency on this issue, these documents do not provide additional clarity on the question about “How Many Panthers?” There is still a credibility issue if the agencies use the minimum count as a go-to statement when we know there are more. There needs to be a clear statement that fits with the facts we have. Something to the effect of “We know there are at least 139 panthers, but we suspect that there is between X and Y”.

GL suggested rearranging structure of Outreach Document. Tom Jones (TJ) stated the need to be clearer on the issue of counting panthers and accessibility of public vs private lands and also suggested leaving roadkill methodology in the document but to be transparent on the inherent problems with its technique. A suggestion was also made to specify how the occupied acres were delineated. Dave Onorato (DO) clarified the caveats of the roadkill paper of not including juveniles. RD emphasized that the roadkill paper does not provide an estimate of panther density because we don’t have the area for which it was applied to.

ACTION: Have Larry Williams and Nick Wiley discuss White Paper on future coordination call and let that discussion guide future revisions. These steps should take place prior to seeking guidance and input from agency communication specialists on the Outreach Document.

Discussion on the Continuation of Rancher's Supply Annual Minimum Count

LW led discussion on the history of Roy McBrides's (RM) Annual Minimum Count and the need to make the transition towards a more rigorous, scientifically-defensible approach to monitoring the panther population. RD was asked whether we are ready to make that transition and he stated that we are not. Participants discussed the value of monitoring long-term trends and the potential option of continuing the minimum counts, but on a biennial basis. Options were discussed on how Roy's work in the "off" years could be used to provide either refinement or validation of more statistically rigorous population estimation techniques.

A recommendation was made by LW to shift the minimum count to every other year and in the off-year, focus efforts on a camera-type approach. RD stated that he will have a recommendation by winter 2016 on how many panthers would need to be collared for a particular camera grid. KF reiterated the need to continue including private lands when refining this survey technique.

ACTION: Consensus from PRIT is to transition to minimum count every other year and for IM Sub-Team to make an assessment and recommendation on how best to use off-year resources and Roy's time to assist refinement of existing modeling work.

PANTHER HABITAT LOSS IN SOUTH FLORIDA

Robert Kawula (RK) gave a presentation on "Panther Habitat Changes in South Florida 2003-2015" (see <http://www.fws.gov/verobeach/FloridaPantherRIT.html> for PDF). RK also provided some background on the project and that the initial request for the analysis came from Gil McRae (FWC).

Questions and Discussion on Presentation: This is a work-in-progress and the intent is to make this a tool that can be used by the Agencies. RB stated that Gill McRae had asked what PRIT was doing to address the issue of habitat loss. Although PRIT does not have a sub-team appointed PRIT should begin the discussion on how this issue could be addressed. This analysis is a great start, but needs the additional steps to increase accuracy and address key questions (e.g. How much habitat loss and at what rate? How effective have the Service's mitigation policies been?). EF stated that habitat preservation and conservation should receive a greater focus, not just the management of or simply documenting the amount of habitat loss. TJ pointed out that most of the changes have taken place in urban areas, so further clarification should be made in how we define habitat loss and how we characterize these areas where most of this loss has occurred (e.g. Golden Gate Estates). RD stated that we need more information on the covariates that influence panther density.

Discussion on option of forming a Panther Habitat Focus Group/Round Table

It was noted that the earlier focus of PRIT (based on prioritized recovery action item) was on habitat restoration and management and did not include the issue of habitat loss. It was also noted that although the habitat loss issue is something that all agencies are dealing with, it may not necessarily be a PRIT function, regardless of its importance. LW noted that the recovery criteria do have a habitat component and that there is no reason why PRIT can't broaden this priority item. The Eastern Collier Habitat Conservation Plan was raised and a question was raised whether this was an issue that should be addressed by PRIT. LW stated that he would like PRIT to treat that project similar to other specific projects and not make a practice of commenting on them.

ACTION: Elizabeth Fleming will develop options for PRIT to address the habitat loss issue (these options would include an appointed sub-team or formation of a focus group).

UPDATE AND DISCUSSION ON PREVIOUS ACTION ITEMS

An update was provided on the recent grant award from NRCS through its Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) for the PES pilot-program. It should be noted that the RCPP proposal that received the grant award had to be modeled after an existing NRCS program (Conservation Stewardship Program) and therefore does not exactly match the

PES program. An update was also given on the recent notice that NRCS had reduced the amount awarded for the grant. KF provided an update on Jennifer Korn's position with FWC and that her new role and responsibilities will provide FWC with the increased capacity to implement the RCPP project. LW stated that the Service can bring more to the table, if necessary. TJ expressed concern that the current RCPP pilot project has moved significantly away from the PES concept developed by PRIT. The current project as proposed will not work in the long-term unless significantly more money is involved, otherwise landowners will not want to participate. LW clarified that the current funding will be used for a demonstration/concept project that will allow the agencies to work out the bugs.

ACTION: Get PES concept back on original track and re-engage upper-level agency staff to pursue PES concept.

Sportsmen Round Table and ECC Meeting/South Florida Deer Study Update

Todd Hallman (TH) provided 3 dates that the ECC has available for meeting (5/31, 6/1, and 6/2). TH discussed proposed roundtable and noted that he is looking for more sportsmen representation; ideally 12 sportsmen and 12 agency staff. TH stated that he would provide a list of suggested revisions to the initial list of discussion topics proposed by LW.

ACTION: KF will coordinate with TH and LW about dates for ECC meeting and roundtable discussion.

Puma Taxonomy

DS informed the CT that the Service was considering taking the lead on commissioning an independent, comprehensive taxonomic review of the Florida panther. LW provided some background on the sequence of events related to the proposed delisting rule for the Eastern cougar and coordination that has taken place between Regions 4 and 5 on this issue.

TEAM ROUND-TABLE AND PARKING LOT

Participants discussed the need to further pursue the habitat loss issue and the benefits of further refining the habitat loss analysis conducted by BK.

RD provided further clarification on the expectations of his current modeling work providing a good density estimate with a firm statistical base. RD emphasized that he was positive that statistically rigorous estimates could not be generated with only unmarked individuals.

WRAP-UP AND ACTION ITEMS/NEXT STEPS

CT discussed options for next meeting. LW mentioned that Commissioner Bergeron would like to attend and that the CT could consider having the meeting in South Florida. Consensus was reached to hold next meeting in South Florida and to consider option of a 2-day meeting (afternoon meeting on first day and morning meeting on the second day in order to allow for travel time on both ends.)

ACTION: DS will send Doodle Poll to CT with proposed dates for next meeting.

MEETING ADJOURNED