

**NOTES**  
**Florida Panther Recovery Implementation Team Meeting**  
**Fish and Wildlife Research Institute**  
**St. Petersburg, FL**  
**April 19-20, 2018**

**Thursday, April 19**

**WELCOME**

**Attendance:**

Larry Williams (USFWS), Kevin Godsea (USFWS), David Shindle (USFWS), Kipp Frohlich (FWC), Robin Boughton (FWC), Elizabeth Fleming (Defenders of Wildlife), Todd Hallman (Florida Sportsmen's Conservation Association), Tom Jones (Barron Collier Companies)

**Livestock Indemnity Program/Farm Bill Discussion**

Larry Williams provided update on recent discussions and meeting with representatives from USFWS, the Florida Cattlemen's Association (FCA), and the USDA-Farm Service Agency (FSA). The main topic of these discussions were the limitations of the existing Farm Bill and LIP program and what specific changes in the Farm Bill language could remedy these problems. One specific issue discussed was how the Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limit prevents LIP payments from going to landowners who have extremely important panther habitat. FCA is supportive of changes in Farm Bill and for the LIP process to go smoother. Neil Combee, FSA State Executive Director, was also supportive of the proposed remedies and deferred to the USFWS for the right approach. Larry made it clear that he cannot officially recommend changes in the Farm Bill language on behalf of the USFWS, but he can make the case for why changes may be beneficial for keeping panther recovery and ranching compatible. Larry provided a copy of email sent to stakeholders on this issue and a map depicting Florida cattle production by county and the expanding range of the panther population, including the recent documentation of female panthers and kittens north of the Caloosahatchee River (see handouts). Elizabeth Fleming also provided an update on Defenders of Wildlife's efforts on improving the Farm Bill language. Tom Jones suggested that FCA should take a written position to the Farm Bureau and the National Cattlemen's Association. And if FCA takes a position, this would be easier to get in front of Florida senators. Although the Florida Land Council does not take positions on these types of issues, Joe Hilliard is on the Land Council and influential in FCA. It will be important to have someone that is an influential agricultural representative to take the message to D.C. Larry stressed the need for all PRIT members to engage their organizations and outside contacts, including congressional representatives (when appropriate) on the Farm Bill issue.

**ACTION: Larry will follow up with Jim Handley to see if a position on Farm Bill/LIP has or can be taken by FCA. Tom will contact Joe Hilliard and Liesa Priddy.**

**ACTION: Kipp will follow up with Eric Sutton and Jen Mock Schaeffer.**

**ACTION: Todd will talk to Layne Stephens with Florida Airboat Association regarding the AGI relief issue.**

**ACTION: Kevin will ask Erin Myers to simplify the technical recommendations for improving LIP verification language and will send Larry to review. This language should be distributed to FCA, Eric Sutton, and others who can engage FSA on LIP.**

**USFWS Panther Framework Update**

Larry provided brief update on the USFWS efforts to update the panther mitigation framework. Projected timeline for completing this work is January 2019. Roxanna Hinzman is leading this effort with Dave Hankla and assistance from David Shindle and other staff from the South Florida Ecological Services Field Office. Progress is coming along. Retaining the option to keep some mitigation funds to channel that towards livestock compensation. As the USFWS official position is close to completion, USFWS will share those ideas with all stakeholders and get rounds of comments before it becomes final. These types of mitigation frameworks do not have to be published through the Federal Register, as they are decided by individual Field Offices. FWC has been engaged in this current process. The previous role of the State in project review has been primarily focused on State listed species.

### **USFWS Five-Year Review/SSA Update**

David Shindle provided update on the Panther SSA and Five-Year Review. The SSA Team consists of Shindle, Darrell Land (FWC), Dave Onorato (FWC), and Randy Kautz, who has been contracted by FWC using grant funds from USFWS. The team is making progress but the Panther SSA is obviously complex. That said, Shindle anticipates a comprehensive product that will be valuable for informing future decisions, including the Five-Year Review recommendations. Shindle reiterated his appreciation for the technical assistance provided by FWC staff and FWC's commitment for making the SSA a priority task for their panther team.

Some questions were raised regarding the current elicitation process by the Service as it relates to decisions informed by SSA's. Although the State is very engaged on the SSA process, the decisions that result from these elicitations are "Service-only". There is still confusion among FWC and other groups regarding the new SSA process. The question was also raised whether the USFWS must consider current recovery criteria in listing/de-listing decisions. Larry clarified that the Service must consider the "Five Factors" but that Recovery Criteria only provide guidance. Kipp stated that this concept came to light early in the Recovery Criteria sub-team's meetings and it was obvious that even though this has always been the case, it has not been conveyed well with the public. Kipp also reminded the Team that the Recovery Criteria Sub-Team's work has been put on hold until the SSA and Five-Year Review are completed.

### **FWC Inventory and Monitoring Update**

Robin Boughton provided update on FWC's efforts to refine panther inventory and monitoring techniques. FWC staff are prepared to replicate the "McClintock" roadkill study in order to generate a second population estimate based on the 5 years of additional data collected since the last analyses reported in the peer-reviewed manuscript. In lieu of the capture and radiocollaring efforts that were placed on hold this year, Roy McBride (Ranchers Supply, Inc) has been tasked with collecting biopsy dart samples from treed panthers in targeted study areas. The objective of this work is to determine whether additional marked animals acquired through this technique could inform and improve the McClintock model.

FWC is also wrapping up the third phase of the assessment for the spatial-mark-resight approach for estimating panther densities from data generated from remote camera grids. This third phase has taken place on private lands (Immokalee Ranch) north of the public lands that were the focus of Phase 2. FWC statisticians are also re-running the analyses conducted by Dr. Bob Dorazio from the Phase 2 camera data and examining the correlation of panther densities with habitat covariates and re-examining the potential for these site-specific densities to be used to generate rangewide population estimates.

Dave Onorato (FWC) is also completing a comprehensive post-introgression genetics paper that will assess triggers for future introgressions and also an assessment on the effective population size for the breeding

population. In addition to these projects, Dave Onorato is also tasked with assisting the USFWS complete the Panther SSA. Robin reiterated that it is difficult for FWC staff to prioritize the aforementioned tasks/projects as they are all important for informing revised recovery criteria, refining population monitoring protocols and for determining future management triggers, and have all been identified as priority tasks by PRIT. Therefore it would be valuable to have both the USFWS and PRIT's guidance on which monitoring tasks/analysis is the most important. Larry stated that the re-running the McClintock model with the updated data, along with assisting with the SSA, are the most important priorities from his perspective. Based on this, Larry recommended that PRIT slow some things down and put some things on pause for the next 12 months until the SSA and Five-Year Review are completed.

## **Meeting Adjourned**

**Friday, April 20**

### **North of River Outreach Update**

Elizabeth provided update on the recent outreach efforts by Defenders of Wildlife staff and the justification for them (e.g., expanding panther population north of the river, documentation of females and breeding, documented depredation, and documented intraspecific aggression). Defenders hosted public outreach workshop at Archbold Biological Station on April 14, 2018 (see attached agenda). Approximately 45 participants (including volunteers and colleagues) were in attendance. Overall the group was "pro panther" but were cognizant of the issues that could impact private landowners and the increased need to address human-panther conflicts north of the river. Defenders staff have also conducted 10-11 outreach presentations north of the river.

Larry expressed appreciation for Defender's pro-active communication strategy north of the river and asked if there also needs to be a similar strategy of engagement with sportsmen north of the river. Todd Hallman stated that if the agencies were serious about recovering the panther, they would move them north. FWC has a new Division Director for Hunting and Game Management (Morgan Richardson) and Kipp suggested that he should lead this effort of stakeholder outreach for north of the river. Todd also suggested that if future outreach workshops did take place that the sportsmen should facilitate and not agency staff.

**ACTION ITEM: Todd, Kipp (with the assistance of Morgan Richardson), and Elizabeth will pursue ways to increase outreach efforts to connect with sportsmen north of the Caloosahatchee River.**

### **Transportation Sub-Team Update**

Elizabeth provided an update and highlights from the last Transportation Sub-Team meeting held on February 21, 2018. Nancy Payton will be retiring August 3, 2018 and there was a discussion on how Sub-Team members are appointed. Florida Wildlife Federation (FWF) is hiring a replacement for Nancy's position and the question posed to Larry was whether the person who fills this position for FWF would be the replacement for Nancy on the Sub-Team. Larry suggested that it would be beneficial if Elizabeth can recommend to PRIT who should fill the sub-team vacancy. USFWS could appoint someone to fill that vacancy, but that the initial advice should come from Elizabeth and other Core Team members.

At the February 21<sup>st</sup> meeting, Amber Crooks was nominated and accepted the Chairperson position on the Sub-Team. The question was raised by the Sub-Team whether a position that represents environmental consultants be invited as an official member. Larry stated that no action should be taken on this at this time given that the first priority should be determining the future of the sub-team.

Elizabeth provided an update of Dan Smith's cost surface mapping project north of the river; Dan will present results of running various models at the next Transportation Sub-Team meeting on May 10, 2018 and Sub-Team will determine next steps for bringing nearly finalized product for input at the next PRIT meeting. The Hotspots Map should be finalized at the May 10, 2018 meeting and then Larry Williams would be able to distribute to agencies and stakeholders as last time. The hotspots map will be continually updated by FDOT staff based on the updated panther information FWC provides.

The Team discussed the future of Transportation Sub-Team. There was consensus that transportation issues are not going away and therefore the sub-team can continue to provide a value to the Core Team. However, there needs to be specific guidance and tasks given to the Sub-Team. Sub-Team members are free to advocate for transportation projects independently but members should not represent themselves in any official capacity of PRIT when taking positions. The question was raised as to what the Core Team would need from the Sub-Team once the current projects are completed. There was a consensus that the focus should be north of the river, with an emphasis on how to maintain and increase the permeability of the I-4 Corridor.

**ACTION: Core Team request that the Transportation Sub-Team provide advice and/or strategies on how to increase permeability of the I-4 Corridor for panthers and other wildlife.**

**ACTION: Transportation Sub-Team should complete and deliver to Core Team the final predictive Hot Spots map for north of River and report back to Core Team at future meeting.**

**ACTION: Transportation Sub-Team should provide updated south of the river Hot Spots Map and make the annual update of this map an official expectation of sub-team. Larry Williams will distribute updated Hot Spots Map to agencies and stakeholders.**

#### **New Agenda Topic: Future Release Sites North Of River**

Kipp added this as an agenda item in order to drive discussion on the topic of the potential for future panther releases north of the Caloosahatchee River and to hopefully generate specific action items from PRIT on this topic. With more panthers on the landscape and an increase in the number of panthers held in temporary captivity for rehabilitation due to injuries sustained from vehicle strikes, it should be imperative for the agencies to have clear decision points on where these panthers can be released. With the documentation of female panthers north of the river and the documentation of at least one female breeding at Babcock Ranch, there should be an action item for PRIT to advise the agencies on whether a proactive outreach strategy should be implemented on future release scenarios. With documented breeding north of the river, the timing is right to take advantage of a scenario of having a female panther in-hand for release that has no history of negative interactions with humans or history of repeated depredations on domestic pets/livestock. A question was raised on which agency would primarily be responsible initiating this action. Elizabeth reminded team that the FWC Panther Position Statement stated that FWC will continue to partner with USFWS north of the river. There are no significant legal/policy barriers for releasing panthers north of the river given that the river is an artificial barrier and that the population expansion has occurred naturally. The most critical components would be with addressing private landowner concerns as it relates to any regulatory burdens, the potential impacts on livestock producers, and sportsmen concerns over impacts on deer populations and future access on public lands. Kipp cautioned the Team not to overthink the constraints and conditions for release scenarios. The agencies have always made the decision on the best location to release a panther based on a suite of considerations, including selecting locations that provide that panther the best chances at survival. The agencies are prepared to defend these decisions and that a decision to release a panther north of the river would be no different. FWC (along with Shindle from USFWS) are currently revising the capture

and handling protocols for panthers and these protocols will also include decision points and guidelines for the removal, convalescence, and release of panthers. Larry stressed that discussions must first take place with the stakeholder groups above (private landowners, livestock producers, and sportsmen). The reality is that the agencies may never have the acquiescence of all 3 groups (we don't have that now with sportsmen south of the river), but the agencies should be fully transparent and engaged on addressing their concerns. As for a next step, Kipp noted that it's sometimes easier for the public to raise these types of issues with the Commissioners than it is for staff to raise them. Todd stated that a request for FWC commissioners to consider this issue could be raised by a sportsman at the next Commission meeting as a catalyst to drive the discussion. Elizabeth could also be prepared to speak on the same issue.

**ACTION ITEM: Support from PRIT on this topic. Kipp will discuss with FWC panther staff about specific criteria that addresses this need. Kipp will also share PRIT's encouragement to consider locations north of the Caloosahatchee River as potential release sites for panthers that meet the appropriate criteria. Once potential release criteria and protocols are established, these would need to be embedded in talking points for future outreach opportunities.**

**ACTION ITEM: Kipp will follow-up with FWC Hunting and Game Management staff regarding rumors that hunting at Avon Park Air Force Range was being restricted due to panthers. Todd will follow up with Troy Hershberger (Wildlife Biologist at APAFR) on the same issue.**

### **Discussion on Future PRIT Priorities**

Larry suggested that some of the Core Team's actions be slowed down a bit to give time for agency staff to work on the SSA and Five-Year Review, Farm Bill revisions, and stakeholder engagement north of Caloosahatchee River. Tom suggested that the ranching community will need to engage more on the LIP issue and this effort cannot be carried by agency staff and PRIT alone.

This August will be PRIT's 5-year anniversary and Kipp provided a history of its implementation, team representation, and prioritization of recovery tasks. The highest priority for PRIT has been programs for private landowners and although the team has not accomplished the success it had intended, progress has been made and relationships with private landowners and livestock producers has improved. Although the panther taxonomic issue was initially a low priority for PRIT, this topic is now being addressed in the SSA. Regardless of the prioritization list, the value of PRIT has been its role as a forum of diverse stakeholder groups to bounce ideas off and find common ground for specific recovery actions.

Larry recommended that the current Action Items discussed are good to focus on, but no new projects should be initiated. There should be a focus on the SSA and Five-Year Review and those priorities captured in this meeting's action items. In spite of some perceptions from stakeholder groups, relationships with private landowners and sportsmen have improved and the intent of PRIT and the agencies to improve these relationships has been transparent.

### **Team Round-Table and Parking Lot**

Team discussed Ron Clark's retirement and the resulting NPS vacancy on PRIT. Kipp reminded team that there has been representation from NPS-Big Cypress National Preserve on PRIT and this intent is also stated in the PRIT Terms of Reference. NPS has been a long-standing partner in panther recovery efforts and it is important to continue having their representation on PRIT. Team discussed the recent leadership vacancies at Big Cypress National Preserve (e.g., Superintendent Tammy Whittington, Deputy Superintendent, Ron Clark, and others). With Ron Clark's departure, the previous action item for summarizing key language from NPS

management plans relative to the Florida panther and public use remains incomplete. Kevin Godsea will reach out to Ron and attempt to get the work completed to date. The Team also discussed the option of having representation from Everglades National Park as opposed to Big Cypress National Preserve.

**ACTION ITEM: Todd will work with Kevin on the key language issue with NPS management plans.**

**ACTION ITEM: Larry will make contact with Tammy Whittington regarding future NPS representation on PRIT.**

### **Wrap-Up and Next Steps**

Elizabeth discussed the intent of Defenders of Wildlife to host a panther science symposium and asked for input on the ideal timing for this event. Given the commitments of science staff from FWC and USFWS, it would be better not to schedule the workshop this year and instead wait until the SSA and Five-Year Review has been completed. Elizabeth also made the suggestion that an inventory of State regulations on panther protections should be completed prior to the completion of the Five-Year Review.

**ACTION: October 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> PRIT Meeting in West Palm Beach. Shindle will send out invite.**

**ACTION ITEM: Elizabeth will draft agenda item for the next meeting to discuss the Defenders of Wildlife Science Symposium.**

**Meeting Adjourned**