

# Florida Panther Protection Program Summary

## *Overview*

- A collaborative effort between leading conservation organizations and Eastern Collier landowners to better protect and manage the Florida Panther in Southwest Florida and assist recovery of this endangered species.
- An environmentally and economically balanced program.
- Includes both suggested adjustments to the innovative Collier Rural Land Stewardship Area Program and additional components.
- Through an incentive-based land use program, the Florida Panther Protection Program would secure a contiguous range of panther habitat connecting the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge and Big Cypress National Preserve through Camp Keais Strand and the Okaloacoochee Slough with Corkscrew Marsh and adjacent lands in the region.
- The program involves approximately 195,000 acres of private land in Collier County.
- The participants acknowledge that they individually or collectively do not have the authority to amend the Collier County Rural Land Stewardship Area Program nor do they have the authority to effect policies, agreements, or regulations concerning how protection and management of the Florida Panther will be implemented. The authority to amend the Collier County Rural Land Stewardship Area Program and Florida Panther protection and management measures lies solely within the local government and various State and Federal agencies.
- The program can be complementary to, but does not take the place of, non-panther planning and permitting programs.

## *Participants*

- Conservation Organizations: Audubon of Florida, Collier County Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife, Florida Wildlife Federation.
- Landowners: Alico Land Development Corporation, Barron Collier Partnership, Collier Enterprises, Consolidated Citrus LP, English Brothers, Half Circle L Ranch Partnership, Pacific Tomato Growers Ltd., Sunniland Family Limited Partnership.

## *Scientific Technical Review*

- Area under review: the Rural Land Stewardship Area within Collier County.
- Committee: comprised of six respected biologists and scientists with expertise in the Florida panther.
- Purpose: to evaluate whether the Panther Protection Program contributes to the overall protection, management and recovery of the Florida Panther.
- Expected completion: less than six months, but additional time may be requested if deemed necessary.
- Landowners and conservation organizations to cooperatively and collaboratively facilitate and support the work of the Scientific Technical Review Committee.

### ***Next Steps***

- At end of the Scientific Technical Review, if consensus is reached to move forward, rural landowners and conservation organizations will enter into a binding agreement
- Landowners will undergo a federal consultation process with the United States Department of the Interior Fish and Wildlife Service to develop a Conservation Agreement or its equivalent.
- Rural Land Stewardship Area Five Year Review Committee, Collier County Environmental Advisory Council, Collier County Planning Commission and Board of County Commissioners will review and consider adoption of portions of the Florida Panther Protection Program into the Rural Land Stewardship Area Program Growth Management Plan policies and the Land Development Code.
- The public will have opportunities to review and comment through all entities and procedures listed above.

## **Proposed Florida Panther Protection Program Components**

### ***Funding***

- Creation of the Paul J. Marinelli Florida Panther Protection Fund.
- Rural landowners will contribute to the Fund according to a pre-agreed formula that is generally tied to the generation and utilization of “Panther Habitat Units” from a Stewardship Sending Area within the Rural Land Stewardship Area.
- Fund expected to generate in excess of \$150 million in contributions through 2050.
- Fund to be administered by an independent nonprofit tax exempt entity, the Wildlife Foundation of Florida, and governed by a Board of Directors comprised of representatives of Audubon of Florida, Collier County Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife, Florida Wildlife Federation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and a representative of the rural landowners.
- Fund Board to utilize the Fund for protective measures such as panther habitat restoration, buffering against human-panther interaction, locating and construction of panther crossings, and acquisition of habitat demonstrated to be important to panther protection and management.

### ***Additional Mitigation***

- Requirement for additional mitigation and appropriate restoration for development impacts to primary panther habitat within the Rural Land Stewardship Area.

### ***North and South Panther Corridors***

- Proposed creation of a North Corridor and the proposed maintenance and enhancement of the South Corridor for the panther through the Rural Lands Stewardship Area.
- Rural Landowners to be incentivized through the generation of restoration credits to create, enhance and restore such corridors.

### ***Agricultural Preservation***

- Proposed creation of an agriculture preservation credit within the Rural Land Stewardship Area, consistent with direction of the Rural Land Stewardship review Committee.
- Goals: to assure agricultural lands can be protected for future generations and to reduce development pressures within the Big Cypress Area of Critical State Concern.
- A landowner shall be eligible to receive 2.0 Stewardship Credits for each acre of Open Land that is designated as a Stewardship Sending Area outside the Area of Critical State Concern, and 2.6 Stewardship Credits for each acre of Open Land that is designated as a Stewardship Sending Area within the Area of Critical State Concern, where all non agricultural uses are removed and the remaining uses are limited to agriculture and uses that support agriculture, including farm worker housing. There shall be no intensification of agriculture after Stewardship Sending Area designation.
- The agricultural preservation component reduces the potential build out footprint within the Rural Land Stewardship Area because it creates an incentive to discourage the one unit per five acre development pattern allowed under the baseline zoning and promotes compact, sustainable communities surrounded by viable agriculture.

### ***Other Proposed Collier Rural Land Stewardship Area Program Components***

- Hamlets will be eliminated as a form of Stewardship Receiving Area.
- Towns shall not exceed 5,000 acres.
- Outside the Area of Critical State Concern, Villages shall not exceed 1,500 acres. Within the Area of Critical State Concern, the current Collier RLSA Overlay Program standards shall apply to Villages.
- Compact Rural Development shall include as a permitted use eco tourism lodging, recreational hunting and fishing enterprises, and family homesteads for the Rural Landowners.
- A concept is being discussed that would create a mechanism to ensure that when a landowner within the Rural Land Stewardship Area establishes a Stewardship Sending Area, a “conditional easement” is placed on the subject property until such time as all permits are in hand for the Stewardship Receiving Area to which the credits from the Stewardship Sending Area will be applied and providing no action is taken prior to permitting that diminishes the resource values on the Stewardship Sending Area; at which point the easement becomes permanent.

### ***Collier Rural Land Stewardship Area Buildout***

It is the group’s preliminary estimate that the changes proposed to the current Rural Land Stewardship Area credit system as a result of the new panther corridors and the agriculture preservation components will enable a maximum Stewardship Receiving Area development foot print of 45,000 acres (current program has a development foot print of potentially 90,000 acres) within the total 195,000 acre Rural Land Stewardship Area. This estimate will be refined in conjunction with any other proposed changes to the credit system through the Rural Land Stewardship Area Five Year Review Committee’s work.

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