



United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Florida Ecological Services Field Office



February 6, 2024

Jennifer Marshall, P.E.
Director, Office of Environmental Management
Florida Department of Transportation
605 Suwannee Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0450

Subject: Concurrence with Florida Department of Transportation Conservation Plan For
The Florida Panther

Dear Ms. Marshall:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) supports and appreciates the Florida Department of Transportation's efforts to develop and implement their Conservation Plan for the Florida Panther, developed under the auspices of Section 7(a)(1) of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (ESA). Section 7(a)(1) of the ESA directs Federal agencies to use their authorities to further the intent of the ESA by carrying out programs that conserve endangered and threatened species. The panther conservation plan creates a robust mechanism to identify and prioritize conservation efforts that will promote proactive recovery of the Florida panther during the implementation of FDOT's surface transportation program.

As stated in FDOT's panther conservation plan, the purpose is to provide a framework that results in net conservation benefits through the implementation of the FDOT surface transportation program while supporting the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) recovery goals for the Florida panther. This goal will be achieved by reducing wildlife vehicle collisions (WVC), providing opportunities for range expansion, public education and outreach, and other innovative conservation measures. The Plan will provide several tools, a suite of conservation measures, and other processes that can be implemented by FDOT in coordination with the USFWS, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), and other partners.

FDOT has also included a Project-Level Section 7(a)(2) Form for screening its activities that may affect Florida panthers. Other federally threatened or endangered species will be subject to separate consultation under Section 7(a)(1) of the ESA.

We agree that this approach and the conservation actions described in the panther conservation plan will improve conditions for the Florida panther and will continue to provide consistent expectations and outcomes for our review of FDOT's activities. As a result, we anticipate Section 7(a)(2) consultations under the ESA will be streamlined with respect to Florida panthers and allow for better allocation of staff resources when evaluating species other than panthers and for complex projects, thereby fulfilling both organizations' missions in a more effective manner.

Further, the panther conservation plan establishes a mechanism to minimize and mitigate impacts to panthers using a novel approach that considers the increased function of habitat that results from installing fencing and wildlife crossing in association with FDOT's activities.

The Service anticipates that the FDOT panther conservation plan will foster increased collaboration with other partners including municipal transportation departments, private landowners, and other State and Federal partners such that a more comprehensive approach to conserving panthers at the landscape scale is achieved.


In order for the Service to be kept informed of actions minimizing or avoiding adverse effects or benefitting the Florida panther, other listed species or their habitats, the panther conservation plan includes a reporting mechanism to keep the USFWS and other partners apprised of the progress of the Plan, as well as any conservation efforts carried out for Florida panther.

Thank you for collaborating to develop this approach for conserving Florida panthers, over and above what is required in conjunction with your transportation activities. We appreciate your support and partnership in conserving endangered species and their habitat in Florida. If you have any questions, please contact Mark Cantrell, Service liaison to FDOT, at mark_a_cantrell@fws.gov or 850-328-2307.

Sincerely,

**ROBERT
CAREY**

Robert L. Carey
Manager, Division of Environmental Review
Florida Ecological Services Office
Gainesville

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cc:

FDEP, Tallahassee, Florida (Heather Mason)
FFWCC, Tallahassee, Florida (Jennifer Goff)
USCG, Miami, Florida (Randall Overton)
USFWS, Panther Recovery Coordinator, Shindle