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## Report on Florida Panther Protection Programs

With member support and foundation grants, the Southwest Office has been able to accomplish the following on behalf of the Florida panther and other native wildlife living in the Western Everglades.

### **Defeated New Interchange in Western Everglades**

One of the most notable recent victories was the **defeat of the proposed interchange on I-75/Alligator Alley**. If built the interchange with its accompanying road network and residential development would have directly resulted in the loss of over 10,000 acres of occupied panther habitat just west of the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge and north of the Picayune Strand Everglades Restoration Project.

The Federal Highway Administration informed the Florida Department of Transportation and Collier County that there is no justification or need for an interchange in this remote area of the Western Everglades. Following this notice and using the Federation's suggested actions, the Collier Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) updated its planning schedule pushing reconsideration far into 2020s and reassigned funding to public transportation and local road network improvements.

Instrumental in the Federal Highway Administration's decision to reject the interchange was a detailed analysis of the Cumulative Impacts Study submitted by Dr. Dan Smith, well-respected transportation ecologist at the University of Central Florida and the Federation's consultant. Dr. Smith exposed serious flaws in the Florida Department of Transportation's methodology. These flaws skewed the study findings to the benefit of interchange proponents.

The Federation is now **focusing on public acquisition of key wetland parcels** in North Golden Gate Estates just north of Picayune Strand Everglades Restoration Project and west of the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge. RESTORE monies from the BP oil spill are a target because these wetlands are the headwaters for freshwater flowing into Naples Bay and Rookery Bay; and serve as the habitat bridge between the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge and Collier County's North Belle Meade Natural Resource Protection Area. With the possibility of an interchange now dashed, opportunities to purchase parcels increases because the development pressure is gone.

The Federation, working with local conservation partners, was successful in having these parcels included in the new Collier County Watershed Management Plan as wetlands to protect through purchase or land use incentives such as density transfer. They also are a priority project for the Big Cypress Basin/South Florida Water Management District.

### **Securing More Underpasses**

As the Federation works to protect and connect conservation lands across Southwest Florida, an integral part of these campaigns is **securing more wildlife crossings**. There are 50 crossings in Southwest Florida with several in the planning stages. The Federation had a direct influence over 48 of the built crossings and is involved in the planning of the two more proposed crossings. The crossings vary in design from 5' high to those large enough to drive a vehicle through. Construction costs vary from less than \$1m to over \$4m.

In recent years the Federation provided Florida Gulf Coast University's Panther Posse Program with four state-of-the-art Reconyx field cameras for placement at several underpasses. The photos are used in the Panther Posse Program's education efforts and are used by state and federal panther biologists to monitor panther populations and movement without the stress of capture and fitting with a radio collar.



*This crossing is under SR 29 near the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge.*



*Although designed to accommodate panthers, other wildlife including alligators use the underpasses.*

In 2013 the Federation contracted **Dr. Dan Smith to study the varied underpass in Southwest Florida and to develop recommendations on designs that are cost efficient without sacrificing wildlife use.** The two-year study will also include recommendations on landscape approaches to underpasses and maintenance of built underpasses.

The current study is building on the 2005-06 work as well as the photo diaries development by Florida Gulf Coast University's Panther Posse Program. Dr. Smith is coordinating with the junior panther biologists as well as the director of the Panther Posse Program.

Dr. Smith is an internationally known transportation ecologist associated with the University of Central Florida. In 2005-06 he was lead scientist on the Eastern Collier Wildlife Movement Study, funded in part by the Federation, which identified road segments north of the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge that needed underpasses. Florida Department of Transportation, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission consult Dr. Smith's study when reviewing road projects.

### **FGCU Panther Posse Program**

The Federation has long supported Florida Gulf Coast University's Panther Posse Program which educates fourth grade students on native wildlife and encourages them to "get outdoors" to explore nature. This year the Federation provided 20 buses so Panther Posse junior biologists could explore the Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed and experience panther habitat firsthand.



*Panther Posse Junior Biologists on a Federation sponsored “see-hear-touch-smell” hike through local conservation lands.*

### **Promoting Private Conservation Efforts**

The Federation is extremely proud of its respectful working relationships with ranchers and farmers. The last four underpasses built in Collier County and the two proposed underpasses are all abutting private conservation lands and would not be possible without the cooperation of the private landowners. Dr. Smith’s underpass study which requires access to private lands could not be done without the support of ranchers and farmers who trust the Federation.

Two important planning efforts are moving through the approval process. They are **the Eastern Collier Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan** under the US Endangered Species Act and the **West Hendry County Sector Plan** under the local growth management plan. Both planning efforts are sponsored by partners in the Florida Panther Protection Program, a combined vision of eight major rural landholders and four conservation organizations including the Federation.

These planning projects provide the opportunity to restore and enhance regional habitat links connecting Lee County conservation lands and Hendry County conservation lands through private lands in Collier County.

On the next page is a map of the land included in the Eastern Collier Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan. It corresponds to the Rural Lands Stewardship Area established under Collier County’s Growth Plan which is 200,000 acres. Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge is in the lower right corner in jade green. Immokalee is the white. Lake Trafford is blue and to the west of Immokalee.

**Note the cross hatching near the top and going left to right. This is the regional habitat corridor that the Panther Review Team (PRT) recommended be included in the proposed Habitat Conservation Plan.**

The six authors of the PRT Report were Dr. Dan Smith, Chris Belden (then US Fish and Wildlife Service Panther Recovery Leader), Darrell Land (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Panther Team Leader), David Shindle (former Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission panther biologist), Tom Logan (formerly with Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission), and Randy Kautz (formerly with Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission).

The Federation helped fund the PRT Report.

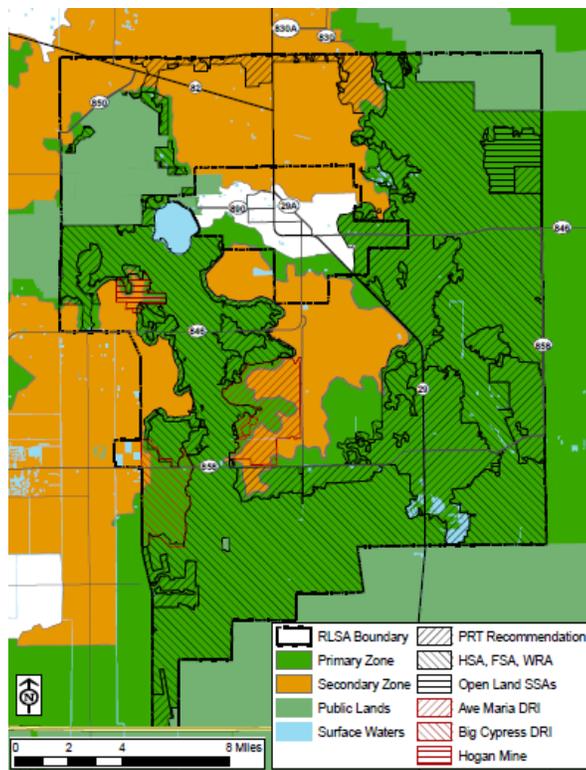


Figure 17. RLSA lands proposed by the PRT for additional protection, lands with high natural resource values (i.e., HSA, FSA, some WRAs), RLSA Open lands protected as SSAs, and the Ave Maria DRI, Town of Big Cypress DRI, and the proposed Hogan Mine relative to the Florida panther Primary and Secondary Zones (Kautz et al. 2006).

*Area outlined in **black** is the boundary of the proposed Habitat Conservation Plan and is the Rural Lands Stewardship Area (RLSA) under Collier County’s Growth Management Plan*

The Federation is deeply engaged in both efforts and recently facilitated an agreement among King Ranch/Consolidated Citrus, Florida Department of Transportation, Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, and US Fish and Wildlife Service for an underpass on SR82 that connects the King Ranch protected lands. This underpass is part of a regional habitat link between Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed northeast into the OK Slough State Forest.

The proposed Eastern Collier Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan, the West Hendry County Sector Plan, and other projects that have an effect on panthers and wildlife habitat will continue to be scrutinized by the Federation's Southwest Office staff along with its advisors.

## **Holding Local Governments Accountable**

In the legal arena, the Federation **secured a precedent-setting ruling regarding the federal Endangered Species Act, public interest, and Florida's Bert Harris Private Property Protection Rights Act.**

Florida Wildlife Federation and Collier County Audubon Society, represented by Attorney Tom Reese, challenged a property rights settlement agreement that allowed rock mining and related industries on 1000 acres in the heart of North Belle Meade. North Belle Meade is 15,000 acres west of the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge and northwest of the Picayune Strand Everglades Restoration Project.

The Federation and Collier County Audubon Society were granted intervenor status in the property rights claim to represent nature's interests, but refused to sign the settlement agreement because it failed to protect listed species habitat.

The proposed mining site is within the home range of two panthers and is nesting/foraging habitat of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. Collier County and the landowner unsuccessfully argued that a Bert Harris property rights settlement agreement trumped state and federal wildlife protection obligations.

The court, including the Appeals court, ruled that property rights settlement agreements must adhere to the federal Endangered Species Act and cannot circumvent state laws including growth management and environmental protection.

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