

APPENDIX A

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APPENDIX B.

Summary of Comments and FPIC Response for June 1987 Revision

This revised Florida Panther Recovery Plan was drafted by the Technical Subcommittee of the Florida Panther Interagency Committee and distributed to approximately 120 individuals and organizations for review on October 31, 1986. Comments were received from 24 reviewers.

The comments ranged from very non-specific general comments basically supportive of the plan and recovery efforts, to detailed section by section review and comment.

All comments received were carefully reviewed and studied by the Technical Subcommittee and incorporated into the plan as determined appropriate.

There were numerous comments which were directed toward specific points of concern that could be handled through simple editorial changes or corrections as appropriate.

The following discussion provides a narrative summary of the major comments received and as appropriate, how they were handled. As much as possible, in order to enhance continuity, the comments have been grouped into broad major categories of discussion.

I. General

Comment: Major shortcomings of the plan in general as expressed by some reviewers were that the plan needed expanding to provide more detail, more innovative and ambitious strategies not more of the same (status quo), was too open-ended and should present the worst case scenario.

Response: Because of a general lack of available biological data and knowledge on the Florida panther, the plan has to be somewhat open-ended and lacking in detail in some respects. But this should not present a problem. The purpose of the plan is to identify to the extent possible/practical the major causative agents to the panther's endangered status and to provide for the immediate initiation of actions which are viewed as necessary to overcome these problems. As additional data are developed during the recovery process, the plan can be amended to identify additional actions needed. It is the feeling of the FPIC that this plan has identified and addressed the issues relative to the panther as known at this point in time and has developed practical, achievable recovery strategies based on available data, information, and knowledge.

Comment: Considerable comments surfaced relative to the urgency of actions needed, specific dates, time frames, and costs should be identified as well as specific agency responsibility/commitments.

Response: The inclusion of the targeted starting dates (fiscal year), task duration, costs estimates, and responsibilities for all tasks in the Implementation Schedule as presented in this final plan should address most of these concerns. It should also be pointed out that the initiation/ implementation of some tasks are contingent on the completion/results of others. Therefore, target dates will have to be somewhat flexible in some cases.

Comment: There were several comments relative to the assigned task priorities in the implementation schedule.

Response: Numerous changes have been made and the present assigned numbers should accurately reflect priority ranking as based on the guidance provided on page 51 of the plan.

II. Florida Panther Interagency Committee/Technical Subcommittee/ General Coordination

Comment: Some commentators felt that the role/function of the FPIC/TS should be better defined and membership expanded. Others made recommendations as to specific duties, responsibilities, and activities that the FPIC/TS should be involved in. These ranged from such actions as providing review, oversight and coordination relative to plans/actions on public lands, to reviewing and commenting on permit applications at the state and federal level. There were also numerous comments recommending that recovery needs/actions be coordinated with various agencies, groups and individuals.

Response: It is felt that the plan adequately addresses the general role/function of the FPIC/TS. More detailed specific information and guidance is contained in the Memorandum of Agreement dated May 28, 1986 which established the committee. Consideration

to expanding the representation on the committee has been addressed on several occasions. The present consensus is that the committee can probably more successfully function under its present make-up. However, various other agencies/individuals will be requested to attend and participate in committee/subcommittee meetings and functions as appropriate. Input from non-representative entities is considered critical to the successful functioning of the committee and will continue to be requested and utilized to support its efforts. The committee will continue to provide oversight and guidance to member agency plans and actions and will actively involve and be involved in non-member activities affecting the Florida panther. It will continue to provide guidance and direction to all panther recovery efforts. However, to be successful the importance of complete and total coordination and cooperation from the smallest landowner to the largest government agency cannot be over emphasized. Numerous changes have been made in the plan to reflect this need.

III. Research/Studies

Comment: Considerable comment was received relative to various aspects of the plan dealing with research and studies. Some reviewers felt that we could not afford to wait for the research/study data to become available, that we must act decisively now. This point was brought up several times as it relates to establishing a viable population figure. It was also recommended that we should rely more on existing data on other species/subspecies and not wait for specific data on the Florida panther.

Response: It should be pointed out that considerable data is now becoming available relative to the panther and its primary prey species, the white-tailed deer, as a result of research/study efforts initiated within the last few years. This critical data will aid in developing management and protection strategies and decisions. It along with other appropriate data already available, whether on the Florida panther or other species/subspecies will provide the foundation and guidance upon which to initiate a coordinated, intensive recovery effort. Additional information will continue to become available as ongoing efforts continue and new efforts are initiated. All available data will be fully utilized to complement, refine, adjust and improve management and protection strategies in order to ensure a state of the art recovery effort.

IV. Protection/Management

Comment: There were many comments, some rather general in nature and some fairly specific, that addressed such broad topics as panther and deer habitat issues, highway and other hazards, management and protection needs, disturbance, etc. Some of these were specific to public lands and some related to private lands only. Comments on these issues will be addressed under other headings later, as appropriate.

The major theme around which most comments were based is the fact that we are dealing with a critically endangered animal whose dwindling habitat is continually being exposed to increasing competition and demands from the human element. These demands occur in many forms, including habitat loss through land use changes, habitat and food competition and disturbance from various forms of recreation (hunting, ATV/ORV use, etc.), road hazards, etc. Commentors expressed concern that major emphasis must be placed on all fronts to reduce the human/panther competition and hazards and protect the habitat that remains.

Response: As mentioned earlier some of these concerns will be addressed in following sections. The FPIC recognizes and agrees with the position that actions must be initiated to enhance the level of protection presently being provided the panther and its habitat. The revised recovery plan calls for a coordinated effort involving all levels of government to utilize their management and regulatory authorities and capabilities to provide the maximum level of protection possible, both to the panther and its habitat. Speed limits on critical roadways will be highly regulated. Road construction and modifications in habitat areas will incorporate safety features designed to provide for an enhanced level of protection. The FPIC will continue to evaluate and develop ways to better preserve and enhance existing habitat and develop strategies to address public use conflicts.

V. Acquisition

Comment: Directly related to the above topic on habitat protection, is acquisition. Several commentors stressed the importance of an active acquisition plan emphasizing speed and consisting of specific timetables.

Response: The FPIC recognizes that habitat preservation whether it be by acquisition or some other means is the key to the long-term survival of the Florida panther. The recovery plan presents a general summary of key acquisition needs as presently identified. However, a much more comprehensive document addressing short-term habitat preservation needs has already been developed (Fakahatchee Strand: A Florida Panther Habitat Preservation Proposal). This 69 page document was developed through a cooperative effort between the FWS, NPS, and the State of Florida and recommends a "team approach" to preserving approximately 88,000 acres of panther habitat in the Fakahatchee Strand area of the Big Cypress Swamp. This area represents only a small fraction of the total area considered critical to the survival of the panther in south Florida. However, the successful preservation of this area, coupled with vast land areas already under public control, along with other important areas identified in

the recovery plan for protection, should provide the land area necessary for panther survival in south Florida. Each agency represented on the FPIC will develop a detailed acquisition plan, including target dates, which will be a part of Comprehensive Land Management Plans to be developed by each agency as referenced in the revised recovery plan. Acquisition is considered a high priority activity by the FPIC and consequently will receive special emphasis.

VI. Public Lands

Comment: Considerable comment relative to public lands was received. It basically ranged from a recommendation that the level of human-panther competition should be explored, to taking all public lands, establishing a panther preserve and eliminating all activities detrimental to panthers. Specific topics identified included the recommendation for a single management plan for public lands, supplementing the prey base, exotic vegetation control, natural systems management, recreational use, prey base management, hunter check stations, poaching, food plots, burning, salt blocks, etc.

Response: The final revised recovery plan incorporated many of the specific recommendations as presented. A major addition to the plan which will provide a means to incorporate the other appropriate recommendations is task 126. This task requires each FPIC agency to develop a Comprehensive Land Management Plan to address panther needs on their respective lands. These plans will be geared to enhancing habitat conditions for panthers and will address all facets of each agency's on-site management/ protection responsibilities and capabilities, such as fire, water, recreation, vegetation, etc. The basic theme of each plan will be that the long-term survival of the panther in south Florida will likely be dependent upon the preservation and appropriate management of lands under public control and each agency will maximize the use of their authorities and capabilities to this end. Each plan will be subject to the review of the FPIC.

VII. Private Lands

Comment: The importance of private lands was strongly emphasized by several commentors. The need for management strategies and habitat protection efforts was stressed.

Response: The importance of private lands to the panther is recognized by the FPIC and is evidenced by the fact that current data indicate that possibly up to one-half of the panthers occurring in south Florida presently occupy private lands. Because of this fact, the FPIC places high priority on the protection and management of panther habitat occurring on private lands. Special emphasis will be placed on working with these landowners and closely coordinating all recovery efforts with them. A Comprehensive Land Management Plan will be developed for private lands. The cooperation and assistance of all landowners will be vital in the implementation of recovery efforts. All governmental agencies will be requested to utilize their full regulatory authorities and capabilities to ensure that maximum protection is afforded all panther habitat areas.

VIII. Captive Breeding/Population Enhancement

Comment: These topics received a significant level of comment. They ranged from a position of wholehearted support of using surgically sterilized hybrids in the reintroduction studies to a position that data obtained from such efforts will be worthless and a waste of funds and time. There was also significant comment relative to matters dealing with reintroduction sites and efforts. Outbreeding was also mentioned, as was the importance of consulting with and involving others in this effort.

Response: As is the case with most of the other biological needs and efforts identified within the plan, there is a total void of information and data relative to reintroduction efforts involving the Florida panther. This, coupled with the fact that all activities associated with the reintroduction effort must be carried out in a manner to have minimal impacts on the critically low population in the wild, will require a cautious step-by-step strategy utilizing all information, expertise, and assistance available. This will include decisions on the use of surrogate animals, selection of reintroduction methods and sites, time frames, etc. The FPIC views this section of the plan as extremely important and its success will be critical to achieving the recovery objective as identified in the revised recovery plan. Various tasks necessary for this effort have already been initiated and an orderly progression through successful reintroduction is provided for in the implementation schedule. The matter of initiating outbreeding is considered premature at this point, but depending on population status, etc., may be pursued at some point in the future as a last resort effort.

IX. Summary

The FPIC recognizes that the Revised Florida Panther Recovery Plan will not necessarily meet the satisfaction of all entities concerned about the plight of the Florida panther. However, it is felt that the plan accurately reflects the basic problems associated with the Florida panther and presents an orderly, workable plan of action based on the present state of knowledge and information to ensure its continued existence. Sufficient checks and balances will be provided for in the implementation of the plan to ensure

that all decisions are based on the most accurate information available. It is the opinion of the FPIC that the Florida panther can be recovered. However, it will not be easy and it cannot be done within a short time frame. Successful recovery efforts will require the cooperation and assistance of many entities, ranging from landowners within and adjacent to key habitat areas to the largest governmental department.

Summary of Comments Received on the August 1994 Draft Revision

Written comments on the August 1994 Technical/Agency draft were received from five entities (Archbold Biological Station, Florida Panther Technical Advisory Council, Florida Wildlife Federation [with enclosure from Mr. Al Ford, II], National Parks and Conservation Association, and The Fund for Animals, Inc.). All commentors indicated support for the proposed genetic restoration program for the panther. Some were interested in reviewing more detailed information on the proposed program, which will be provided in the genetic management plan and the Environmental Assessment. The involved agencies were encouraged to expedite genetic restoration activities as much as possible. Other comments included the need to update the biological information contained in the recovery plan/revise the recovery plan. A number of comments expressed concern over habitat issues. Including the continued loss of panther habitat, the need for more aggressive habitat preservation and acquisition activities, the support for incentives to landowners to retain and manage panther habitat on their lands, the need to designate Critical Habitat, and the need for a cumulative environmental impact statement to address urban and agricultural impacts on panther habitat. Also mentioned was the need to continue development of artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization technology, which could be important for genetic restoration and management.

Comments received not specific to the proposed genetic restoration program will be considered during a complete recovery plan revision scheduled for 1995.