



November 20, 2024

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Fort Myers Permit Section
701 San Marco Boulevard
Jacksonville, FL 32207
ATTN: District Engineer and Michael Ornella

RE: Comments on Bellmar (SAJ-2024-01593 (SP-MAO)) and Rural Lands West (SAJ-2008-02431 (SP-MAO))

Submitted via email

Dear District Engineer,

We are writing in regards to the proposed Bellmar (#SAJ-2024-01593) and Rural Lands West (SAJ-2008-02431) developments in Collier County, Florida. We thank the Army Corps of Engineers for announcing an extension of the comment period for Bellmar via notice on November 14, 2024. The comment period was extended through December 9, 2024.¹

The Army Corps also extended the comment period for Rural Lands West “due to the complexity and nature of the project.”² The relationship between these two applications will increase the intricacy of project analysis, as well as the public interest in these projects. We write today to provide additional context about these two projects, as well as additional information for consideration under both of these applications. Please include this letter in the file for both Bellmar and Rural Lands West.

The Rural Lands West and Bellmar Projects Are Related and Phases in a Larger Plan

Though the Rural Lands West project was the first to be considered by the Army Corps of Engineers,³ proposed development from north to south in the entire Big Cypress Stewardship District was first unveiled in the Naples Daily News as early as 2006 (Figure 1). The ultimate vision of development—seen again in the applicant’s Eastern Collier Multiple Species Habitat

¹ US Army Corps of Engineers Jacksonville District Website, Public Notices, Permit Application No. SAJ-2024-01593 (SP-MAO), <https://www.saj.usace.army.mil/Missions/Regulatory/Public-Notices/Article/3965415/saj-2024-01593-sp-mao/>

² US Army Corps of Engineers Jacksonville District Website, Public Notices, Permit Application No. SAJ-2008-02431 (SP-MAO), <https://www.saj.usace.army.mil/Missions/Regulatory/Public-Notices/Article/3940631/saj-2008-02431-sp-mao/>

³ Army Corps of Engineers, 2008. Public Notice, Permit Application No. SAJ-2008-210 (IP-MAE). July 8, 2008.

Conservation Plan that was proposed from 2010 through 2022 but never approved⁴—would run from Immokalee Road to nearly the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, a span of 10 miles long and 2 miles wide. This plan includes Bellmar, Rural Lands West, as well as lands north of Rural Lands West.



Figure 1

In June 2023, Collier County provided its final approval on portions of Rural Lands West and Bellmar, known as “Town of Big Cypress” by the County.⁵ As part of the applicant’s vision and part of the County’s consideration, is a proposed new roadway called Big Cypress Parkway

⁴ US Fish and Wildlife Service. Eastern Collier Multi-Species ITP/HCP Withdrawal.

<https://www.fws.gov/library/collections/east-collier-multi-species-itphcp-withdrawal>.

⁵ Layden, 2023. Town of Big Cypress Gets Final Approval from Collier County; Development to Begin Soon. Naples Daily News. July 18, 2023. Note: Not to be confused with the 2008 application to the Army Corps of Engineers for “Town of Big Cypress” which was similar but smaller than the current Rural Lands West or current County-approved “Town of Big Cypress.”

which would run throughout the development, connecting Rural Lands west and Bellmar (Figure 2 and 3).⁶



Figure 2

⁶ Collier Enterprises, 2022. The Town of Big Cypress: A vibrant new town for eastern Collier County's future. Accessed at <https://townofbigcypress.com/>.

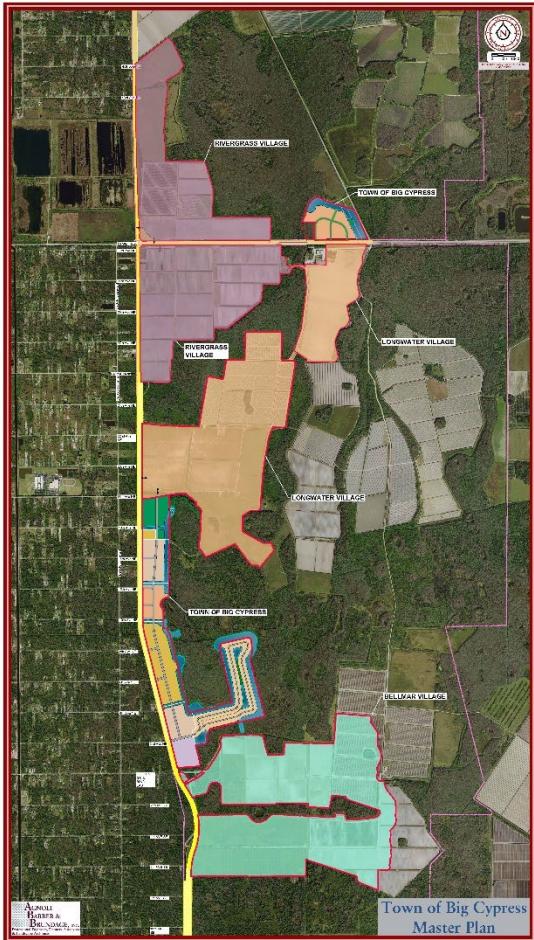


Figure 3

During prior review of these projects with the state of Florida, the US Fish and Wildlife Service requested the applicant to provide a Traffic Impact Statement (TIS) showing the results of a combined Rural Lands West and Bellmar analysis. The Service's logic underlying the request for a combined report was that the two projects "are located in close geographic proximity to one another and are undergoing agency review close in time...."⁷ Per the applicant's documents, the two projects would generate at least 133,500 + additional daily trips on already deadly roadways for the endangered Florida panther.⁸

Unacceptable Individual and Cumulative Effects

There are a number of large mining and development proposals in currently rural and agricultural areas of eastern Lee and eastern Collier County that individually and cumulatively pose a significant threat to our southwest Florida environment (Figure 4).

⁷ Passarella & Associates, 2023. Cover letter for FDEP Applications No. 0396364-001 and 0396966-001, transmitting Trebilcock Consulting Solutions traffic analysis. February 13, 2023.

⁸ Trebilcock Consulting Solutions, 2022. Rural Lands West Traffic Analysis. December 7, 2022.

The federal agencies must consider relevant information about these nearby projects during its decision-making process to appropriately consider cumulative impacts. The table below depicts some of the major actions in the area that add to the cumulative damage to listed species habitat and wetland loss, as well as the fundamental change to urban densities within a sensitive wetland ecosystem.

Project Under Review	Number of homes	Number of residents	Amount of traffic new net	Panther Primary Zone direct impacts	Wetland direct impacts
Rural Lands West	9800	23520	88194	3463	270
Bellmar	4382	10517	45317	1816	135
Immokalee Road Rural Village	4042	9700	27887	676	192
Troyer Mine	0	0	1278	841	214
FFD	5208	12708	6354	555	79
Kingston	10000	24400	95198	1177	12
	33432	80845	264228	8528	902

Figure 4

Given the intertwined nature of Rural Lands West and Bellmar, the interrelated Big Cypress Parkway, and the extensive individual and cumulative impacts posed, we again ask that you deny these projects.

Feline Leukomyelopathy Impacts to the Florida Panther Population

Around 2018, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) began to collect evidence of Florida panthers with symptoms related to the new disorder afflicting panthers, termed feline leukomyelopathy (FLM).⁹ FWC describes this disorder as a neuromuscular disorder, that is impacting panther and bobcat's spinal cords, upon further necropsy inspection, resulting in panther's difficulty or inability to walk and rear leg weakness.¹⁰ Panthers, especially kittens, who are afflicted with FLM will have increased difficulty in moving around their territory, hunting and feeding, or crossing roads.¹¹

As of March, 2024, FWC has confirmed 19 cases (8 in panthers and 11 in bobcats) based on physical evidence, as well as 69 probable causes (32 panthers and 37 bobcats) based on video evidence. The majority of FLM cases are concentrated in the southwest Florida area.¹²

The agency believes the condition is permanent with no cure; and has not identified the causes of FLM. FWC, in its Conservation Plan, describes FLM as a "threat because of its poorly

⁹ Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 2024. Updates.

<https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/wildlife/panther/disorder/updates/> Disorder Impacting Panthers and Bobcats.
<https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/wildlife/panther/disorder/>

¹⁰ Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 2024. Disorder Impacting Panthers and Bobcats.

<https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/wildlife/panther/disorder/>

¹¹ Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 2024. Disorder Impacting Panthers and Bobcats.

<https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/wildlife/panther/disorder/>

¹² Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 2024. Florida Panther Conservation Plan, *Puma concolor coryi*. January 5, 2024.

understood epidemiology and potential population-level impacts.”¹³ Further, at least one adult panther had to be euthanized because of FLM, and many kittens also are likely to have been killed due to FLM.¹⁴ It is believed that a case of FLM in Charlotte County included one of the limited panthers born north of the Caloosahatchee River.¹⁵

We understand that FLM may be related to the human-wildlands interface: FWC “is testing for a variety of toxins and pathogens including herbicides and pesticides.”¹⁶

We are extremely concerned for the future of the Florida panther population in light of FLM and the ongoing lack of understanding about its causes. The Army Corps and USFWS must ensure that they do not authorize impacts that may compound the likely impact that FLM is having on the endangered Florida panther population.

Conclusion

Thank you for considering our comments and feel free to reach out to use if you have any questions or would like to discuss further at (239) 776-5601.

Sincerely,



Amber Crooks
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Cc: Robert Carey, US Fish and Wildlife Service

¹³ Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 2024. Florida Panther Conservation Plan, *Puma concolor coryi*. January 5, 2024. P. 6.

¹⁴ United States Fish and Wildlife Service, 2020. Species Status Assessment for the Florida Panther, Version 1.0.

¹⁵ Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 2024. Florida Panther Conservation Plan, *Puma concolor coryi*. January 5, 2024.

¹⁶ Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 2024. Disorder Impacting Panthers and Bobcats.

<https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/wildlife/panther/disorder/>