

Wildlife officials must save Florida panthers from eastern Collier sprawl

GUEST COMMENTARY

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In late July, a Florida panther was struck by a vehicle in the heart of her habitat and left to die on the side of the road. She was two years old. She was the 18th panther to die from a car crash this year, but she will not be the last.

Vehicle strikes are the top documented cause of death for Florida panthers, with 20-30 deaths every year. With Florida panthers only numbering 120-230 globally, these unnecessary deaths could lead to an unrecoverable situation and the ultimate loss of this already dwindling species.

Most collisions occur in the last remaining core panther habitat of southwest Florida, with the worst roadkill hotspots in eastern Collier County. One in five panther road kills occur here, threatening the species' survival and recovery.

Between "crown jewel" public preserves, like the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge (FPNWR) and Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed, are agricultural and environmentally sensitive landscapes.

Yet, landowners in eastern Collier County have been pursuing massive urban development on these lands, which shelter nearly two dozen imperiled species, support food security, sustain rural lifestyles, capture flood waters, and include thousands of acres of invaluable wetlands and flow ways.

What would happen if 45,000 acres of these lands — in the heart of an area that is essential to the panther's survival — were converted to mines and urban residential and commercial developments? What would happen if these developments resulted in an additional 200 miles of new and upgraded roads and more than 800,000 new daily car trips made by an additional 183,000 cars on the roads? Now we have the apparent answer.

We obtained records of draft documents from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that indicate the mega-development in eastern Collier would likely jeopardize the panther's future, due in large part to the increase in expected panther deaths by vehicle strike. Accordingly, the Service believed more safeguards, changes to the proposal, and additional mitigation would be necessary to conclude otherwise.

The Fish and Wildlife Service rarely makes formal "jeopardy" determinations, even when failing to do so is likely to seriously undermine a species' conservation. A report published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences found that of 6,800 formal Service reviews completed from 2008 to 2015, "jeopardy" was called twice.

For years, the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, Center for Biological Diversity, and Sierra Club — and thousands of members of the public — have been sounding the alarm over the grave impacts this sprawling growth would have on the Florida panther and other imperiled species as the Fish and Wildlife Service considered permitting it via a so-called "Habitat Conservation Plan" (HCP) for Eastern Collier County.

All the while, the landowners proposing their massive developments were urging the Agency to abandon its interpretation of the Endangered Species Act to essentially absolve them of responsibility for the deadly consequences of inducing new traffic outside their developments. Their twisted re-imagining of the ESA would be inconsistent with the law, and vastly underestimate the impact of traffic-generating sprawl development in the heart of panther habitat.

Despite seemingly blaming government delay for their ultimate withdraw from the plan, the landowner applicants indicated in a letter to the Service that they didn't intend to move forward with the "Habitat Conservation Plan" unless the Agency bent and let them off the hook for potentially hundreds of anticipated panther road kills caused by traffic inextricably linked to their massive developments over the next 50 years.

Thankfully, it appears the Service stood firm and refused to ignore this disquieting death count. That the Agency found more restrictions and mitigation would be required to avoid jeopardy from the impacts of the developers' "Habitat Conservation Plan" shows the true colors of that ironically named plan. The plan's grievous inadequacies were apparent from the start, despite attempts to green-wash it.

While this information has been hidden in Agency records until now, and more public records have yet to be released for review, the documentation our organizations have so far uncovered indicate that the sprawling development as proposed in the HCP will threaten the panther's future.

But the threat of these developments is not gone. Through a separate process, this vision for an urbanized eastern Collier County still advances, considered project-by-project, the proverbial "death by a thousand cuts." The Fish and Wildlife Service still must review these individual projects, such as Bellmar, a 5,000-acre site near the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge.

State and federal wildlife agencies should halt consideration of these proposals. Now that we know the devastating effects of the environmentally detrimental "Habitat Conservation Plan," the Agencies must stop these same eastern Collier proposals once and for all. The very existence of the Florida panther depends on it.

Learn more at www.conservancy.org/hcp