

More Protection Sought for Florida Panthers

The Conservancy of Southwest Florida files petition with Interior Department to designate critical habitat for the big cat.

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An estimated 90-100 Florida panthers remain in the wild today, almost all in South Florida. The endangered Florida panther would get additional legal protection to help prevent its extinction under a petition filed with the Interior Department Administration by the Conservancy of Southwest Florida.

An estimated 90-100 Florida panthers remain today, almost all within South Florida. Those numbers put them at an extremely high risk of extinction, the conservancy said.

The petition seeks to designate those lands needed to preserve the panther by asking the Interior Department to designate the Florida panther's critical habitat. The petition requests that the panther's "primary zone" be included in the definition of critical habitat.

In 2006, the primary zone, which covers a portion of eastern Collier, Lee and Hendry counties, was defined by scientists as the minimum area essential to sustain the existing panthers. The conservancy also seeks designation of lands defined as "secondary" and "dispersal zones," which scientists have determined as necessary for establishment of expanded populations for the panther's long-term recovery.

"This designation is long overdue," said Andrew McElwaine, conservancy president. "It will resolve once and for all those lands which should be protected and those which can be available for development."

Since the 1930s, at least one-third of the forested land in South Florida has been cleared for agricultural and residential development, according to the conservancy. More development jeopardizes the panther's recovery from the brink of extinction.

If the petition is accepted, a public process will begin for the designation of habitat which will include public hearings in South Florida. Ultimately, designation would be adopted through the federal rule-making process.