

May 27, 2011

Feds reject new territory for Florida panthers

BY DAVID FLESHLER
STAFF WRITER

A petition to reintroduce the Florida panther to part of its historic range in northern Florida and southern Georgia was rejected Friday by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, even though the agency's own recovery plan calls for expanding the endangered cat's territory.

The Center for Biological Diversity and three other groups filed a petition in February to restore panthers to the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, a vast swampy region on the Georgia-Florida border.

In a letter denying the petition, the agency gives no reason for the decision beyond saying that the law does not mandate reintroductions but only gives the agency the option to conduct one. The letter also notes that the agency is implementing a panther recovery plan, including programs to protect private land from development and construct crossings under roads.

Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity said the law requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to take all necessary steps to ensure a species' recovery, and in the panther's case, the service had made clear that that included reintroduction.

"This is not a matter for the Fish and Wildlife Service's discretion," he said. "They are not allowed to maintain a species at the brink of extinction and not move it toward recovery, and that appears to be what they're doing."



Florida panthers once roamed the southeastern United States before hunters in the 19th and 20th centuries wiped them out as "varmints" that killed livestock and deer. Now reduced to a few strongholds south and west of Lake Okeechobee, the panther has undergone a modest recovery, with the number rising from as few as 30 in the early 1970s to up to 160 today.

But scientists say this is far too small a population to ensure the species' survival, particularly since much of the species' remaining habitat is on private land that could be developed. Earlier this week, the Hendry County Commission approved a zoning change to allow a large power plant in panther habitat, although that project still faces several hurdles.

Robinson would not say whether the groups would challenge the decision in court, saying they had just received the letter.

"All I can say is we have successfully challenged decisions like this in the past and we're going to review our options," he said.