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Group wants to bring panthers to Georgia, north Florida

By Eric Staats

Conservation groups are calling on the federal government to set up another population of Florida panthers in southern Georgia.

In a petition filed with the Interior Department and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Thursday, the groups ask to reintroduce the endangered wildcats to the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge along the Georgia-Florida state line or to other nearby lands as an “experimental population.”

“The present moment is critical,” says the petition filed by the Center for Biological Diversity, the Cougar Rewilding Foundation, The Florida Panther Society and Georgia-based One More Generation.

A rebounding panther population in Southwest Florida is running out of room as it has lost habitat to development. Last month, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

issued a new population estimate that bumped up the possible maximum number of panthers to more than 160.

A 2008 federal plan to save the panther from extinction calls for establishing two new populations of at least 240 panthers each.

That plan ranked the Okefenokee ecosystem as the most suitable of nine potential sites throughout the Southeast for panther reintroduction, the petition says.

A 1993 experiment released 19 western mountain lions in the Okefenokee area and documented that 15 of them established home ranges there before they were recaptured in 1995, the petition says.

Despite all the talk of reintroduction, the Fish and Wildlife Service has not moved forward with the plan.

Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman Ken Warren said Thursday that relocating

panthers is about more than science.

“You have to take into consideration the human factor, which is huge here,” Warren said.

Many people who live next to the Okefenokee refuge keep cows, horses and goats and would fear their livestock becoming panther prey, said Pender Lloyd, city manager of Folkston, Ga.

“I’m sure there would be plenty around here who would be concerned,” Lloyd said.

That should not stop the federal government from getting started on building support for panther relocation, said Center for Biological Diversity conservation advocate Michael Robinson.

“Time is running out for the Florida panther,” Robinson said.