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## Environmental groups ask government to set up new Florida panther colony in Okefenokee Swamp

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Federal officials have talked for 30 years about finding a new place for Florida panthers to roam without ever taking action. Meanwhile, development has nibbled away at the available habitat in South Florida.

Now a coalition of environmental groups has petitioned the government to start transplanting Florida's state animal to Georgia's Okefenokee Swamp.

The petition, filed Thursday by the Center for Biological Diversity, the Florida Panther Society and two other groups, asks the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to set up a new colony of panthers in the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.

Although most of the refuge lies in Georgia, a sliver is in Florida. It connects on its south end to the state-owned Pinhook Swamp in north Florida, which links to the Osceola National Forest, forming a long wildlife corridor through that part of the state.

Panthers have been considered endangered since the first endangered list was published in 1967. By the mid 1990s no more than 30 were left, many inbred and suffering from potentially fatal birth defects. Thanks to

a 1995 move that brought in defect-free Texas cougars to breed with the remaining panthers, the population has reached about 100.

In the meantime the Fish and Wildlife Service has not officially opposed a single development in panther habitat since 1993, and tens of thousands of acres have been converted into sites for homes, stores and schools.

So much panther habitat has been lost that when the federal government's official plan for getting the panther off the endangered list was released three years ago, it said there was no longer enough habitat in South Florida to sustain a viable population.

Instead, the plan said, "recovery of the panther depends most critically on establishing additional populations outside of South Florida." The plan called for creating three panther colonies of 240 breeding adults each.

A 2006 survey of possible new panther locations listed the Okefenokee refuge as the one most compatible with what panthers look for in habitat, the petition notes.

So far, though, no panthers have been relocated by the government. When the St. Petersburg Times

asked why last year, Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman Ken Warren blamed the public.

"Due to many factors, including a lack of public awareness and acceptance, reintroduction is not feasible at this time," he said then.

Warren said Thursday that the agency will review the petition and respond "as appropriate." Any move to relocate panthers and create a new population outside South Florida "would require a rigorous and possibly lengthy process."

If the environmental groups don't hear back from the Fish and Wildlife Service in a reasonable amount of time, or the agency turns the petition down without a good reason, then they are likely to go to court, said Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity. The center is already part of a lawsuit against the agency over its refusal to designate any part of South Florida as critical habitat for the panther.

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