

Florida News Connection

A statewide news service for Florida

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"Panther Alert" for Florida Drivers

Biologists with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission say it looks like another deadly year for Florida panthers, with three road deaths since New Year's. Drivers are urged to be cautious, and work is underway to make space for the most endangered mammals on Earth to roam safely. Comments from Mark Lotz, biologist with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and Elizabeth Fleming, Florida representative for Defenders of Wildlife.

Intro: A "panther alert" for Florida drivers. The Florida Wildlife Commission has announced three panthers have become road kill since New Year's. That's on pace with the deadliest year for panthers in recent memory, 2007, when 15 were killed. Each death is significant because there are only about 100 of the animals left. Mark Lotz is a biologist with the commission. He urges motorists to remember they're in panther country in the Everglades and Big Cypress areas of south Florida, and the animals are active at dusk and dawn.

:12 *"Nobody plans on hitting a panther, and animals don't really understand how fast cars can move and they just dart across the road. It's usually a last-second thing when you actually see one before it gets hit. Just be more cautious and aware. "*

Tag: The Florida panther is the only surviving species of cougar living east of the Mississippi River and is considered one of the most endangered mammals on Earth. Lotz says the road kill problem has been reduced to almost nothing in areas with wildlife underpasses, primarily along I-75 through the Everglades, but he says more are needed. Critics say with the current budget crisis, new underpasses are not likely to be funded.

Second Cut: Elizabeth Fleming with Defenders of Wildlife says as development brings people living closer to panther habitats, the risk of traffic deaths increases. She says panthers naturally avoid people, but they need about 200 square miles to roam, and as development encroaches, that space is becoming tougher to find.

:16 *"The largest threat to panther survival is fragmentation and destruction of panther habitat. So we've got to preserve these large tracts of habitat, and the largest threat to panther recovery is human intolerance."*

Tag 1: Fleming says there's new hope with the Florida Panther Recovery Plan that kicked off in December.

Alternate Cut: State wildlife commission biologist Mark Lotz says there's another human health factor intertwined with saving panthers...

:14 *"So when you have all these natural areas set aside you're providing an opportunity for the aquifers to replenish. If people want to be able to turn on their tap and have water, wash their cars, we need these natural areas not simply for panthers but for our own survival, too. "*

OPTIONAL REPORTER WRAP: uses first soundbite(s)

LEDE: It's starting out as a deadly year for Florida panthers, but as Gina Presson reports, help may be on the way.

1:08 Outcue...Gina Presson reporting

Note to Editors: Mark Lotz, 239-643-4220; Elizabeth Fleming, 727-823-3888.