

STATEMENT OF THE FLORIDA CHAPTER OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

The Florida Chapter of The Wildlife Society has long taken a strong interest in the management and preservation of free-living populations of the Florida Panther. The Wildlife Society represents the views of professional wildlife biologists and resource managers and we believe that judgements on hunting and the welfare of wildlife should be guided by both biological and social considerations. Also, The Wildlife Society believes that hunting, when properly regulated, can be a biologically sound means of managing wildlife populations.

We would like to reiterate our full support of the original two proposed regulation changes restricting methods of pursuit and harvest of white-tailed deer and wild hogs on the Big Cypress Wildlife Management Area. Our support is still based upon the following four existing conditions or situations affecting the livelihood of our state animal - the endangered Florida Panther:

1. We have indirect evidence that Florida Panthers are not successfully competing with hunters for deer and hogs since:
 - a. Captured panthers are generally in poor physical condition,
 - b. radio-tagged panthers show an extremely large home range, and
 - c. there is little evidence of healthy recruitment of young animals into the Big Cypress panther population.
2. Access to and harvest of deer and hogs by hunters are greatly increased by the use of ORV's and dogs.
3. Scientific clarification of competition, or lack of competition, requires a long period of time during which current management decisions must be made to protect the Florida Panther while the necessary data are being compiled, and

4. Although it is tempting to maintain the "status quo" regarding hunting regulations under heavy political pressure to do so, that action is really not appropriate in this situation since we are dealing with a critically endangered species and one in which there is strong public interest for protection and preservation.

The Florida Chapter of The Wildlife Society still believes that restrictions placed on the use of ATC's and dogs are very appropriate and are a timely first step in trying to save the Florida Panther.

Thank you.