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U.S. reps ask administration for more Florida panther protection

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Although the Florida panther has been on the endangered species list for 40 years, the government has never officially designated what its "critical habitat" would be. Designating a certain area of South Florida as critical habitat for the panther would likely make it harder for developers, farmers and miners to wipe out the swamps and forests where the big cats live. But now five members of Congress have asked President Barack Obama to designate "critical habitat" for Florida's state animal.

"It's an important issue, since so few of them are left," said Lale Mamaux, a spokeswoman for Rep. Alcee Hastings, D-Miami, who composed the April 7 letter and got colleagues to sign it. So far the White House has not responded, she said.

Just last year the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, after five years of silence, finally rejected a 2003 petition to designate critical habitat for the panther. Paul Souza, the head of the agency's Vero Beach office, said he feared that limiting development in panther habitat might "cause unintended harm by inducing negative public sentiment" toward the animal. He did not respond to a request for comment Thursday.

The wildlife agency has not filed any written objection to development in panther habitat since 1993. A 2005 investigation by the *St. Petersburg Times* found repeated instances where Florida members of Congress had intervened to help developers and miners get permits to build in panther habitat. In addition to Hastings, the signers of the panther letter are Reps. Robert Wexler, D-Boca Raton, Ron Klein, D-Boca Raton, Corinne Brown, D-Jacksonville, and Alan Grayson, D-Orlando. None represents Southwest Florida, where most panthers live.

About 20 scrawny cats remained in 1973, when panthers were included on the original endangered species list. There were so few left that, by the 1980s, inbreeding had produced panthers suffering from heart defects and sterility. Extinction seemed certain. In a desperate gamble, state officials brought in eight female Texas cougars in 1995 to cross-breed with the panthers and wipe out the genetic defects. The experiment worked almost too well. Now about 100 panthers prowl an area that begins just south of the Caloosahatchee River and stretches down through Everglades National Park. Florida's panther population has boomed so much over the past 15 years that it has run out of room in fast-growing southwest Florida, according to the wildlife agency's own findings. As a result there have been more and more conflicts among people and panthers. So far this year, of the six panthers that have been found dead, five were killed by cars — the most recent one hit Thursday morning on U.S. 41 in Collier County.

The day after Obama was inaugurated, the Conservancy of Southwest Florida filed a new petition for the wildlife service to declare areas of critical habitat. Conservancy officials said they waited until there was a new administration to act. So far, though, Conservancy CEO Andrew McElwaine said there has been no response — although at a meeting with wildlife agency officials, "they did not express a whole lot of enthusiasm."

The new petition focused on an area known as the Primary Zone, which covers 3,548 square miles in South Florida. A 2006 study by scientists defined that as the minimum area essential to support the existing panther population. About 70 percent of that zone is owned by the public, as part of a state or

national preserve, but 30 percent is still in private hands. McElwaine pointed out that a 9,000-home development named Big Cypress has been proposed for construction in the Primary Zone.

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