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Panther advocates call for solution to dangerous stretch of road

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A 4-year-old female panther is released back into the wild in 2005 after recuperating for 10 months from injuries suffered after a vehicle struck it at Turner River Road along U.S. 41 East in eastern Collier County. Within 48 hours, the cat was hit again at the same spot and, this time, was killed. The panther has become a symbol of the need for further action to reduce vehicle collisions with panthers at Turner River, environmental groups say. Another female panther was killed there Wednesday.

Photo courtesy of Ralph Arwood

NAPLES — The death of a 3-year-old female Florida panther struck by a car Thursday morning in the Big Cypress National Preserve is heightening calls for action to reduce panther deaths along a stretch of U.S. 41 East.

“Something needs to be done,” Defenders of Wildlife Florida representative Elizabeth Fleming said.

Since 1984, eight panthers have been struck by vehicles along the same 2.5-mile stretch of highway on either side of Turner River; five of them have been killed, including this week’s death. Six of the incidents, including four of the deaths, have occurred since 2004, according to Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission records.

Defenders has been working for the past year with various state and federal agencies to design a wildlife crossing for the panther death hot-spot but there is no time to wait any longer, Fleming said. She said slower speed limits (a 45 mph limit already is in place but only at night), speed bumps, cameras to catch speeders, warning lights and trailers to clock vehicle speeds are needed “right now.” The Florida Department of Transportation plans to meet with Defenders next week to talk about alternatives, DOT spokeswoman Debbie Tower said.

“We’re very interested in sitting down with them and discussing it further,” Tower said.

The DOT awarded Defenders a \$675,000 grant to pay for planning and design of the crossing, which a University of Florida researcher identified as a prime location in 2000. A conceptual design involves building one underpass, about 24-feet wide and 8-feet tall, east of the Turner River Bridge, and a smaller

underpass, about 14-feet wide and 7-feet tall, west of the bridge. The designs and alternatives are expected to be discussed further at a public workshop later this spring or summer.

Wildlife crossings have taken years to get built in other parts of panther country and can cost millions of dollars apiece. For example, six crossings were proposed along State Road 29 in 1991. It took until 2007 to get them all built. The Turner River crossings face not only likely funding constraints, but the crossings have run into opposition from preserve users concerned about fencing along 41 and from an Indian tribe with a sacred cultural site nearby, Fleming said.

An estimated 100 panthers are left in the wild, most of them in Southwest Florida, making the big cats among the most endangered animals on the planet. So far this year, five panthers have been killed on Southwest Florida roads — and biologists are holding their breath at the Turner River site. Another female panther with three kittens has been tracked this spring crossing that stretch of U.S. 41, Big Cypress National Preserve wildlife biologist Deborah Jansen said.

“There’s a good possibility these panther deaths are going to continue in that area,” Jansen said.

A mixed hardwood hammock along Turner River provides cover for panther and naturally funnels them toward U.S. 41; on top of that, roads cross the canal north of U.S. 41 in that area, providing a dry route for panthers to take, Jansen said. Four of the five panthers killed at Turner River have been young females, which strikes at the heart of the population’s reproductive component, she said. Fewer females means less likelihood one will cross the Caloosahatchee River in Lee County to establish a breeding population north of the river, a key to panther recovery, experts say.

It is unclear whether the panther killed Thursday had kittens, which almost certainly would not survive in the wild on their own. In 2004, a female panther was injured after getting hit by a vehicle in the collision hot zone on U.S. 41. Three weeks later, with the mother in captivity for rehabilitation, one of her underweight kittens was killed crossing U.S. 41 in the same spot. A sibling also is believed to have died but was never found. Ten months later, the mother panther was released back into the wild, only to return to Turner River, probably looking for the kittens she left behind, biologists say. Within 48 hours of her release, she was hit again along U.S. 41 and, this time, killed.

Jansen said the only interim measure to deter the panther death toll at Turner River would be reducing the day-time speed limit along that part of U.S. 41 to 45 mph. Two of the panther collisions at that spot, including Thursday’s incident, have happened in daylight. Even with the reduced speed limit, officers cannot enforce the speed limit around-the-clock, Jansen said.

“To me, the only solution to the problem is an underpass and fencing,” she said.