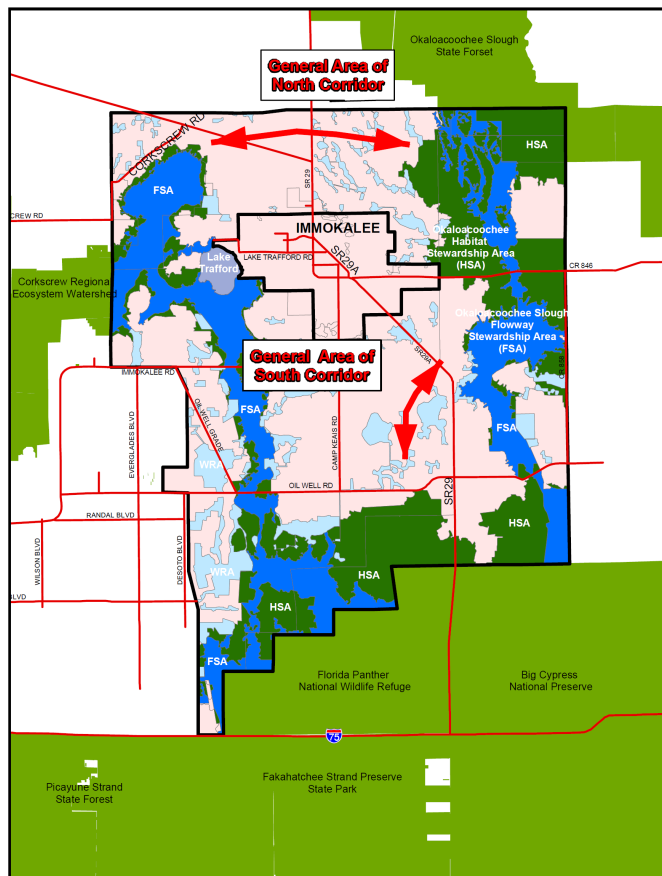


Comments – America’s Great Outdoors Listening Session – June 21, 2011

Southwest Florida/Panther Refuge



Audubon recommends a bold and proactive strategy to protect and help recover the critically endangered Florida panther through expansion of the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge and conservation of habitat available through easement or fee simple purchase.

Expansion of the refuge will also afford a timely and unique opportunity to permanently protect many other species in the Southwest Florida ecological landscape: Wood Storks, Crested Cara-caras, Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, Gopher Tortoises and Indigo Snakes, Florida Black Bears, and others.

Hendry County, in which significant panther habitat is found, does not have the development potential to leverage landowner incentive programs as strongly as Collier County does, so land acquisition is especially appropriate there, provided that includes federal payments to local governments in lieu of taxes.

Both the Rural Land Stewardship and Florida Panther Protection Programs were designed to

complement any and all habitat acquisition through public funding.

Audubon recommends an increase public acquisition of panther habitat and highlights the great value in expansion of the boundaries of the Florida Panther NWR.

The timing is opportune for purchase of private lands in both Collier and Hendry Counties, and would significantly aid in accomplishing the objectives of the Florida Panther Protection Program and the multi-species HCP that has been initiated in the Rural Land Stewardship Area.

The Florida Panther is a vital concern of DOI and the State and should be given a top priority in implementing land deals, especially in occupied habitat. This will help address depredation concerns as well as secure existing range of panther.