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## **East Foundation Proposed Programmatic Safe Harbor Agreement Published in Federal Register**

### **Multi-partner ocelot recovery effort moves forward, includes landowner protections**

San Antonio, TX – September 18, 2023 – East Foundation, a South Texas ranching operation and designated Agricultural Research Organization (ARO), has developed a proposed Programmatic Safe Harbor Agreement (SHA) with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) for ocelot reintroduction to support the species’ recovery in South Texas. The proposal was published in the Federal Register on September 15, 2023, and a 30-day public review and comment period on the proposal was opened the same day.

Safe Harbor Agreements are voluntary conservation mechanisms for private landowners to engage in recovery of species listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). By implementing agreed-upon activities identified in a Safe Harbor that create a net conservation benefit to the species, the landowner is assured that no additional conservation activities will be required of the landowner in the future and that use of their land for otherwise lawful activities will not be constrained beyond the terms of the agreement.

“In Texas, where most wildlife habitat is on privately owned lands, these agreements are a way to assure landowners that they can meet conservation goals for listed species without sacrificing the use and enjoyment of their property,” said Dr. Jason Sawyer, chief science officer for the East Foundation.

Under the proposed Safe Harbor Agreement, East Foundation agrees to release ocelots onto a portion of its San Antonio Viejo Ranch, found in Jim Hogg and Starr Counties, where unoccupied ocelot habitat has been identified. The released ocelots will be sourced from a breeding and behavioral program to be established in Kingsville, Texas, in cooperation with the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Preliminary plans for operating this program can be found at [RecoverTexasOcelots.org/resources](https://RecoverTexasOcelots.org/resources).

Ocelots have been listed as endangered in the United States since 1982, and the only remaining breeding ocelot populations in the United States occur in deep South Texas, including on the Foundation’s El Sauz Ranch in Willacy County. The Safe Harbor Agreement, once revised, as necessary, and finalized after the public comment period, creates a mechanism for private

landowners such as the East Foundation to support ocelot recovery through reintroduction, which will establish an additional ocelot population and thus expand the numbers of ocelots in Texas and their occupied range. As part of the Agreement, East Foundation will also continue with other normal ranching activities on the San Antonio Viejo Ranch.

“The largest population of ocelots remaining in Texas (and, by extension, the United States) occupies East Foundation ranch land in Willacy County,” added Sawyer. “So, we have demonstrated that good land stewardship associated with normal ranching activities is not in conflict with ocelot recovery, and we want to continue ranching operations while also providing an opportunity to expand these populations.”

Together with its research partners in the Recover Texas Ocelots project (RecoverTexasOcelots.org), East Foundation has collected data on ocelot population size, survival and mortality, movements and activity, prey abundance and food habits, habitat use, and competition with other carnivores to solidify recovery strategies for the species.

Under the proposed Safe Harbor Agreement, the USFWS is assured that they can move closer to goals for recovering the ocelot, and the landowner is assured the continued freedom to operate even while supporting endangered species. Once the Agreement is finalized, nearby landowners (in Zapata, Jim Hogg, Brooks, Starr, or Hidalgo counties) can also participate in the Programmatic Safe Harbor Agreement through a Certificate of Inclusion issued by East Foundation.

These landowners voluntarily agree to allow movement of ocelots onto habitat available on their lands, and, as part of the agreement, should ocelots disperse beyond the San Antonio Viejo ranch onto surrounding lands, the landowners and managers of those lands will be exempt from the normal ocelot incidental take prohibitions of the ESA. Specifically, this SHA includes an assurance from the Service that landowners within 31 miles (50 kilometers) of the reintroduction area will be free to carry out any otherwise lawful activity regardless of whether ocelots have dispersed onto their property and regardless of whether they join the SHA as a participant.

“This Safe Harbor Agreement provides private land stewards with the assurances that they can continue to use their property while providing habitat for wildlife held in public trust. The assurances provided in the Agreement offer a path for lasting and effective partnerships that accomplish conservation goals while removing the barriers that have historically impeded these efforts,” said Neal Wilkins, chief executive officer for the East Foundation. “We are excited to lead an effort like this in South Texas, where we successfully operate, and where wildlife conservation and ranching have been vitally important for more than 100 years.”

### **About the East Foundation**

The East Foundation promotes the advancement of land stewardship through ranching, science, and education. We manage over 217,000 acres of native South Texas rangeland, operated as six separate ranches in Jim Hogg, Kenedy, Starr and Willacy counties. The lands were bestowed to the Foundation through the generous gift of the East family in 2007. To honor their legacy, we uphold their vision and values that were established more than a century ago.

For more information on East Foundation, visit [www.eastfoundation.net](http://www.eastfoundation.net)

For more information on the Recover Texas Ocelots project, visit <https://recovertexasocelots.org/>

Link to SHA in Federal Register: <https://www.regulations.gov/document/FWS-R2-ES-2023-0160-0001>

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