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## **Safe Harbor Agreement Signing Event at East Foundation’s El Sauz Ranch**

San Antonio, TX – March 20, 2024—East Foundation, a designated Agricultural Research Organization (ARO) with cattle ranching operations across six ranches in South Texas, held an event on March 19, 2024, at its El Sauz ranch, where the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) officially approved a Programmatic Safe Harbor Agreement for ocelot reintroduction on private lands. This landmark agreement signals continued progress toward ocelot recovery from federally endangered status and effective engagement of private working lands in these efforts.

The Safe Harbor Agreement signing event at El Sauz included attendees from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A&M University-Kingsville, Texas A&M Natural Resources Institute, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. These organizations and others have participated in the Recover Texas Ocelots project to develop and assess strategies for ocelot reintroduction. Representatives from the Texas Wildlife Association and the South Texas Property Rights Association also attended to celebrate the role of private landowners in the conservation of the ocelot, one of Texas’ most iconic and rare native species.

East Foundation has worked with federal, state, university, and private partners to develop a plan to reintroduce ocelots back into part of their historic (but now unoccupied) range in Texas. East Foundation’s San Antonio Viejo ranch in Jim Hogg and Starr Counties was identified as an ocelot reintroduction site based on its potential ocelot habitat, characterized by brush density and composition, and the fact that San Antonio Viejo lies within a remote area of working ranchlands that result in an expansive, intact landscape.

“Private working lands are essential for the conservation and recovery of native species, and private land stewards are often very interested in these efforts. However, they must weigh the conservation benefits against perceived risks often associated with the management of federally listed species,” said Jason Sawyer, chief science officer for the East Foundation. “Part of our planning effort included ensuring that private landowners, including East Foundation, can actively participate in a desirable conservation activity without jeopardizing their ability to manage their land for multiple benefits. The Safe Harbor Agreement we are signing today provides private landowners with that assurance.”

The Safe Harbor Agreement for ocelot reintroduction is valid for 30 years and can be extended. During the Agreement, East Foundation will release ocelots onto the San Antonio Viejo Ranch in an effort to establish a persistent population. East Foundation will also monitor released ocelots to evaluate program success and develop knowledge to further support ocelot populations.

Because the Agreement is ‘programmatic,’ it can include multiple landowners. Any private landowners in Zapata, Jim Hogg, Starr, Brooks, and Hidalgo Counties located west of Highway 281 can participate by obtaining a Certificate of Inclusion from the East Foundation. Participating landowners do not have to release ocelots onto their property but promise to allow ocelots to use the habitat on their land and cooperate with the East Foundation to allow ocelot monitoring. Participating landowners may work with East Foundation to conduct habitat management or research activities to benefit ocelots on their lands. Participating in the program will protect landowners from any Endangered Species Act regulatory surprises related to ocelots that could impact their land uses, and they can maintain their privacy.

The Safe Harbor Agreement also establishes that any private landowners within 31 miles of ocelot release locations on the East Foundation’s San Antonio Viejo Ranch will not have any land use restrictions or other regulations placed upon them related to reintroduced ocelots—even if the landowners do not sign up for a Certificate of Inclusion to participate in the Agreement.

“It’s important to note that we don’t have any ocelots to be released at this time, but we’ve made strides through the process and take great pride in what we’ve accomplished with our partners—there’s so much to look forward to as we work to recover Texas ocelots,” said Neal Wilkins, chief executive officer for the East Foundation. “Now that the Safe Harbor Agreement is approved, East Foundation and partners will begin to develop a source stock of ocelots to use for the reintroduction. Over the next year, East Foundation and partners plan to construct an Ocelot Conservation Facility in Kingsville, Texas, which will be used to breed and raise ocelots. Producing the first ocelot offspring who are ready for life in the wild is expected to take a few years.”

### **About the Ocelot**

The ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*) is a small, wild cat species. In the United States, ocelots have been classified as federally endangered under the Endangered Species Act since 1982. The only remaining breeding ocelot populations in the United States occur in deep South Texas along the Gulf Coast. The East Foundation’s El Sauz Ranch, where the event was held, is a key location for ocelots; breeding ocelots are found there, and the Foundation and partners conduct extensive research on ocelot ecology at El Sauz.

### **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 our work, visit [www.eastfoundation.net](http://www.eastfoundation.net) and <https://recovertexasocelots.org/about-the-texas-ocelot>

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