UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
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ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW TIME (4:35)

ARANSAS NWR │ COMBATING CLIMATE IMPACTS (HOST – SARAH LEON WITH DAN ALONSO)

This transcript was produced from audio provided by FWS Endangered Species Program

P R O C E E D I N G S

(Music plays.)

MS. LEON: Hello there. This is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and joining us today is Wildlife Refuge Manager, Dan Alonso, to tell us about climate impacts and the whooping crane at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge.

Dan, could you get us started today with just a brief overview of the Refuge?

MR. ALONSO: Sure, Sarah, not a problem. The Aransas National Wildlife Refuge is located in Texas, along the Gulf of Mexico. It consists of over 115,000 acres on five units; and the primary purpose of the Refuge is to manage for migratory birds. One of the focal species of birds is the whooping crane.

We do have a total of 280 at the moment in the Aransas-Wood Buffalo flock. They nest in Canada at the Wood Buffalo National Park, and they winter here at the Aransas Refuge. They fly more than 2,500 miles in that migration path. The highest count was this last year at 281, of which we lost one, so now we sit at 280.

MS. LEON: The whooping crane is one of the most endangered birds in North America. So, the 280 cranes there at Aransas Refuge this season represent half of all whooping cranes on the continent. Is that right?

MR. ALONSO: That's exactly right. The reminder of the birds live in captivity or in an experimental flock that migrates from Horicon Refuge in Wisconsin to Florida.

MS. LEON: Alright, and I understand that we're observing some climate impacts there at the Refuge. Is that right?

MR. ALONSO: Yeah, this is something that's been going on for some time, and it's well documented by numerous universities that we work hand-in-hand with. What they're finding to be most impacting at the moment are two things. One is sea level rise, of which has been documented as rising as much as six millimeters per year. Because of that, we start to lose those brackish marsh wetlands that are so important to whooping cranes. The second thing is the encroachment of black mangrove, which exists in other portions up and down the coast, but it has never been found here before. The thought is that since we're having fewer and fewer cold events, it's not setting back the black mangrove's expansion.

Black mangrove has such a growth form that it's very entangling. It's very hard for you and I to walk through and much more so for a bird with long, thin legs like the whooping crane to walk through. So, it's becoming quite a problem for us.

MS. LEON: So what's being done to counter the effects of climate change there at the Refuge?

MR. ALONSO: We're partnering with some of the local universities like Texas A&M and the University of Texas, and the National Estuary Research Reserve here out of Port Aransas. We're trying to better understand the growth of black mangrove and what we can do to soften its impact; and also looking at some of the SLAMM (Sea Level Affecting Marshes Model) modeling that's been done for this refuge, and understanding how we can manage some of the adjacent landscapes to make them a little more accessible to whooping cranes and other wading birds.

We are very optimistic that things are looking quite favorable for the whooping crane in that there is still time, and there are still adjacent habitats that can be protected. The Refuge is working aggressively towards acquiring land. We've initiated a preliminary project proposal that identifies as much as 175,000 acres for land acquisition that would help in the restoration and protection of habitats for the whooping crane.

The recovery plan for the whooping crane identifies as many as 1,500 cranes needed for consideration of downlisting, and there are still habitats that would afford them that opportunity to expand. Canada, on the other end of their spring use, is still pretty much remote and intact. So, there are no hindrances there.

Things are looking very promising for them. Their numbers continue to increase. We do lose a few birds each year, but overall, the population trend is such that it's increasing.

MS. LEON: Well thank you, Dan, for taking the time to speak with us today. It was a real pleasure having you on.

MR. ALONSO: Thanks, Sarah. No problem. It was my pleasure.

MS. LEON: For the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, this is Sarah Leon.