



**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM**

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW TIME (5:41)

BASTROP FIRE CREATES UNCERTAINTY FOR HOUSTON TOAD (HOST – SARAH LEON WITH PAIGE NAJVAR)

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: This is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and I am on the phone today with Paige Najvar, a fish and wildlife biologist at the Service's Austin Ecological Services Field Office.

Paige, I understand the Bastrop Fire dealt a horrible blow to the federally endangered Houston toad this summer, when it swept through central Texas and destroyed a significant portion of the toad's last remaining habitat. Tell us about this, will you?

MS. NAJVAR: As you know the central Texas region has experienced severe to exceptional drought conditions since September 2009. In March 2011 – during what is typically the peak of the Houston toad's breeding season – central Texas received less than a tenth of an inch of rainfall, making this the fourth driest March recorded in the region. Along with a lack of rain, air temperatures during the Houston toad's breeding season have been abnormally high in 2011. According to the National Weather Service, this summer has been the hottest on record for the state. As a result, soil moisture is very low, vegetation is extremely dry, and water levels in Houston toad breeding ponds have been dropping considerably. To make matters worse, there is a weak to moderate La Nina climate pattern that is forecasted to be in place this fall and winter. So, as a result of that, we expect drought conditions to continue at least through late winter, leading up through the toad's 2012 breeding season.

In early September 2011, wildfires broke out within Bastrop County, Texas. These fires burned approximately 35,000 acres of known and potential Houston toad habitat. Until

assessments are completed, we won't know the full extent of the damage that has occurred to the Houston toad habitat, but we do know that all but 100 acres of the 6,000 acre Bastrop State Park, and half of the almost 5,000 acre Griffith League Ranch have been impacted. Within the last decade, the largest remaining Houston toad populations in existence have occurred on those two properties.

We have already begun working closely with Bastrop County, the Texas Forest Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and several of our other partners to develop strategies to minimize impacts to the Houston toad during cleanup and post-wildfire response efforts in Bastrop County.

We are working to quickly provide recommendations regarding Houston toad habitat restoration in Bastrop State Park and private lands within the burned areas. We are also starting to identify strategies to secure additional funding for these habitat restoration activities.

MS. LEON: What's the current state of the toad in Bastrop County?

MS. NAJVAR: The status of the Houston toad in Bastrop County remains largely unknown at this point. We know that only a few individuals were observed during extensive, county-wide surveys that were conducted during the 2011 breeding season. So, the species was already experiencing precariously low population levels before the fires broke out.

With regard to the fire specifically, we believe that the most considerable effects to the Houston toad will likely be adverse changes to its habitat. High intensity, stand replacement fires burned through quite a bit of Houston toad's habitat. The loss of canopy cover, understory vegetation, and surface debris such as leaf litter and logs that occur with these types of fires can lead to loss of habitat availability and cover, which can result in an increased exposure to temperature extremes, increased predation, and reduce dispersal and foraging capabilities. We also expect a significant decline in arthropod species that comprise the Houston toad's prey base.

Soil erosion, which may occur after wildfires, can also affect Houston toad habitat by decreasing water quality in ponds. Therefore, given the effects of years of habitat loss, which have recently been exacerbated by ongoing drought conditions and the wildfires in Bastrop County, we believe that the species is likely on the brink of extinction.

MS. LEON: Well I understand that one source of hope for the species is a captive assurance program that's maintained by the Houston Zoo. Would you tell our listeners about this program?

MS. NAJVAR: Sure. Since about 2007, we have been working with the Houston Zoo, and other partners such as Texas State University and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, on a Houston toad headstarting program. The idea behind that program was to increase juvenile survivorship by taking eggs from the wild, raising these eggs to

juveniles at the Houston Zoo, then releasing these juveniles back to their natal ponds where they were first collected as eggs. The zoo had also been retaining some individuals they raised to create a captive assurance colony of Houston toads.

So, when the Houston toad recovery team met most recently in April 2011, they recommended that we initiate a control propagation program at the Houston Zoo using individuals housed in the captive assurance program. This summer, the Houston Zoo began experimental procedures to determine how to successfully breed Houston toads in captivity, using research that was funded, in part, by the preventing extinction grant awarded to the zoo by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2010. We understand that the zoo personnel are still refining their techniques, but they have been successfully reproducing Houston toads in their facilities. At this point, we believe that reintroducing and supplementing Houston toad populations in the wild by way of the controlled propagation program is our best hope for preventing the extinction of this species.

MS. LEON: Thank you, Paige, for taking the time to tell us about all that's happening there in Bastrop. It was a pleasure having you on today.

MS. NAJVAR: Sure. My pleasure.

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