

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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Inez Connor 202/343-5634

## WHOOPING CRANES AND THE GRAYROCKS DAM CAN COEXIST, INTERIOR AGENCY SAYS

The endangered whooping crane and the partially completed Grayrocks dam and power project can coexist along the Platte River System, Assistant Secretary of the Interior Robert L. Herbst said today in releasing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's formal biological opinion on the project. The opinion was delivered to the Army Corps of Engineers and the Rural Electrification Administration on December 8, 1978.

Herbst said the alternatives suggested in the opinion would preclude jeopardizing the rare cranes and are supported by an out-of-court settlement agreed upon earlier by the two Federal agencies and several conservation groups and the State of Nebraska.

"Together," Herbst said, "the opinion and the agreement provide a flexible framework for the three Federal agencies to reach accord instead of facing the irresolvable conflict that many anticipated."

The biological opinion finds that the project would likely have an adverse impact on the cranes' critical habitat but says that the impact can be offset by totally replacing the 23,000-acre feet of water the power plant will consume each year, or by establishing a trust fund sufficient to improve, or if necessary, to acquire additional habitat. Income from the trust fund could be used for measures such as physical manipulation of the habitat and/or acquisition of water or land or interests therein.

The out-of-court agreement also calls for a trust fund and places a "cap" or upper limit on the amount of water the power plant can withdraw from the dam and reservoir at Grayrocks.

At issue is the reduced stream flow and amount of water that will be depleted by the \$1.6 billion coal-fired power plant served by the Grayrocks dam and reservoir. Although the dam site is 275 miles upstream from the whooping crane habitat, it will alter the river channel, wetlands, and vegetation necessary for the cranes to survive.

The next steps toward resolving the issue were mandated by Congress in recent amendments to the Endangered Species Act, specifically on Grayrocks and TVA's Tellico Dam. On Grayrocks, the Secretaries of the Interior and the Army, and REA's

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Administrator must require such modifications as may be necessary to insure against jeopardy to the cranes. In addition, the newly created Endangered Species Committee will consider the recommendation of the three Federal agencies and then decide by February 8, 1979, whether the recommendations are acceptable or whether the project should be exempted from the requirements of the Act.

The Grayrocks decision will be the first use of the new "exemption" committee established by the 95th Congress. Permanent committee members are the Secretaries of the Interior, Army, and Agriculture; the Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors; and the Administrators of the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The committee will also include representatives appointed by the President who have been nominated by the Governors of the affected States. Letters requesting nominations have been sent to Governor J. James Exon of Nebraska and Governor Ed Herschler of Wyoming, the States determined to be affected for purposes of this review.

The Platte River and its tributaries are the principal resting and feeding areas during the spring and winter migration between Canada and Texas of 75 of the world's remaining 100 wild whooping cranes. The whoopers hovered on extinction in 1941 when their numbers were reduced to 13 adult birds and two young as a result of hunting and habitat destruction. Since the discovery of their nesting grounds in Wood Buffalo Park in Canada, efforts by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Canadian Wildlife Service to increase hatching success and to breed the birds in captivity for release to the wild have been largely responsible for their comeback.

Whooping cranes mate for life and return regularly to the same nesting ground. They cannot readily tolerate human disturbance and can be put to flight by the presence of a human on foot at distances greater than a quarter-mile.

The Platte River area is especially important for the cranes during their spring migration. Along the way they need open, undisturbed expanses for nightly roosting sites and generally use sand and gravel bars or very shallow water in rivers and lakes. They also need areas that provide a variety of food and aquatic vegetation.

This wet meadow habitat is among the last major area where the cranes rest and feed before their nonstop flight to Canada where they begin to lay eggs almost as soon as they arrive. If the cranes were to be deprived of these feeding and resting grounds, they might die, suffer from malnutrition or exhaustion, or be unable to lay eggs.

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