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Media Contacts:

Bill Brooks, [Billy_Brooks@fws.gov](mailto:Bill_Brooks@fws.gov), 904-731-3136

Elsie Davis, Elsie_Davis@fws.gov, 404-679-7107

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes Reintroduction of Non-migratory Whooping Cranes into Southwest Louisiana

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today in the *Federal Register* it is seeking public comment on a proposed rule to reintroduce the endangered whooping crane into habitat in its historic range on the state-owned White Lake Wetland Conservation Area in Vermilion Parish, Louisiana.

The Service and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) will attempt to establish a non-migratory flock that lives and breeds in the wetlands, marshes and prairies of southwestern Louisiana. If this proposal is approved, the reintroduction effort could begin during early 2011.

“With just under 400 birds in the wild, the vast majority of which winter along the Texas coast, whooping cranes are among our nation’s most threatened species. Our proposal to reintroduce a population in Louisiana would not only help protect this iconic species from extinction but would also help us take another big step in our campaign to restore the Gulf Coast’s wildlife, marshes, and coasts to health,” said Ken Salazar, Secretary of the Interior.

The reintroduction is being proposed as part of an ongoing recovery effort for this highly imperiled species, which was on the verge of extinction in the 1940s and even today has only about 395 individuals in the wild (550 worldwide); none in Louisiana. The only self-sustaining wild population of whooping cranes migrates between Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories of Canada and Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas and, like those in the eastern populations, remains vulnerable to extinction from continued loss of habitat or natural or man-made catastrophes. Multiple efforts are underway to reduce this risk by increasing populations in the wild, including ongoing efforts to establish a migratory population in the eastern United States.

The Service proposes the new, reintroduced, non-migratory population of whooping cranes be designated as a non-essential, experimental population (NEP) under the provisions of the Endangered Species Act. This proposed designation and its implementing regulation are developed to be more compatible with routine human activities in the reintroduction area. The designation allows for take of whooping cranes when such take is accidental and incidental to an otherwise lawful activity, including agriculture practices, recreation, and hunting. The intentional take (including killing or harm) of any NEP-designated whooping crane would still be a violation of federal law punishable under the Endangered Species Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

There are approximately 1.3 million acres of marsh, open water, and Chenier habitat in southwestern coastal Louisiana. The cranes would be reintroduced to the White Lake area and are not expected to be affected by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Whooping cranes historically occurred in Louisiana in

both a resident, non-migratory flock and a migratory flock that wintered in Louisiana. The proposed release area is the location where whooping cranes were historically documented raising young in Louisiana.

LDWF Secretary Robert Barham praised this lofty proposal to reintroduce whooping cranes back into the wetlands of the Chenier coastal plain. “Crane species around the world depend on coastal wetlands, and the proposed efforts would reunite this indigenous species back into some of the most productive and expansive coastal freshwater wetlands left in America,” he said.

Today’s *Federal Register* announcement includes the proposed rule. The Service has drafted an environmental assessment (EA), which evaluates several alternatives for establishing a new non-migratory population of whooping cranes. The Service is seeking comments on both documents, and also specifically the following: (1) the geographic boundary for the NEP; and, (2) effects of the reintroduction on other native species and the ecosystem.

To allow adequate time to conduct this review, the Service requests that information be received on or before October 18, 2010. You may submit written information on the proposed rule by one of the following methods:

- Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Follow the instructions for submitting comments.
- U.S. mail or hand-delivery: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R4-ES-2010-0057; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203.
- E-mails or faxes will not be accepted. All comments will be posted on <http://www.regulations.gov>. This generally means that any personal information provided will be posted.

You may submit comments on the draft environmental assessment (EA) by one of the following methods:

- E-mail to: LouisianaCranesEA@fws.gov.
- U.S. mail or hand-delivery: Lafayette Field Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 646 Cajundome Boulevard, Suite 400, Lafayette, LA 70506.

The Service and the LDWF will hold public hearing at the following locations: Gueydan, Louisiana, on September 15, 2010, at the Gueydan Civic Center, 901 Wilkinson St., Gueydan, LA 70542; and in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on September 16, 2010, at the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, 2000 Quail Drive Baton Rouge, LA 70808. Each public hearing will last from 7:00-9:00 p.m. Before each hearing, an open house will be held to provide an additional opportunity for the public to gain information and ask questions about the proposed rule. All comments we receive at a public hearing, both verbal and written, will be considered in making a final decision.

Visit the southeast regional website to learn more at <http://www.fws.gov/southeast>.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

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