DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release December 14, 1979 Inez Connor 202/343-5634

AGENCIES COMBINE FORCES TO SAVE THE CALIFORNIA CONDOR

An unprecedented agreement to initiate one of the most extensive cooperative efforts ever made to save an endangered species--the California condor--will be signed in Washington December 17 by five Federal, State, and private agencies, Secretary of the Interior Cecil D. Andrus announced today.

Andrus will participate in the signing ceremony at 10:30 a.m. in Room 5160 of the Main Interior Building, along with Russell Peterson, president of the National Audubon Society, Robert Herbst, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, and top officials of the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, California Department of Fish and Game. Representatives from the California Congressional Delegation and numerous wildlife and environmental organizations are also expected to attend.

"This cooperative agreement underscores the common concern that the California condor must not go the way of the passenger pigeon," Andrus said. "We are determined to duplicate the growing success with the whooping crane, which continues to demonstrate that human intervention can mean the difference between survival and extinction."

The condor population, now estimated at 25 to 30, has been in a steady decline for the last several years with so little reproduction that birds are dying faster than they are replaced. They may produce only one chick in two years but no evidence of nesting has been found for the past two seasons. Scientists have been unable to determine the principal reasons for the low reproductive rate. The condor recovery actions now being initiated with the signing of a multiagency cooperative agreement will allow "hands on" research involving handling of the condors for the first time.

Aloft, the 20-pound vulture is a spectacular sight, with a 9-foot wingspan of jet black accented with a snow-white triangle underneath. The condor soars on thermal currents for up to 100 miles, its ruby-red eyes searching the ground for mammal carcasses on which it feeds. Known to live more than 40 years in captivity, the condor's life span in the wild may exceed 20 years. It assumes its adult appearance at about 6 years of age and begins breeding sometime later, apparently mating for life.

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Direct examination of some condors is tentatively scheduled for this coming fall. Research biologists, backed up by wildlife veterinarians and mobile medical equipment, will attempt to capture some condors to determine their age, size, sex, and general health from blood, fecal, and feather pulp samples. The birds will be equipped with wing tags and radio transmitters and will be released soon after capture. These procedures will first be fully tested on similar species this spring and summer. The tags and transmitters will provide information on how many condors there are, their daily movements and foraging habits, and where they nest. Very little information of this type presently is available.

Biologists at the scene will decide at that time whether to keep a few immature birds to form a captive breeding flock, to be established initially at the San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park and later at the Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group facility at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

"Without direct research and captive propagation to augment natural production in the immediate future," Andrus said, "we would only be able to document the causes of the California condors' extinction."

Most of the work on the condors will take place in the area of the Sespe Condor Sanctuary in the Los Padres National Forest, where many of the condors spend at least half of the year. The condors range from northern Los Angeles County in the Los Padres National Forest almost as far north as Fresno. A smaller group of condors, believed to be a separate population, ranges along the coast from Santa Barbara nearly to San Jose. No birds will be removed from the coastal population, which is believed to be responsible for all recent reproduction, although there has been none in the last two years.

All of the work with the condors will be preceded by intensive field studies and experiments with similar species. These studies will get underway in earnest in January when the project coordinator is selected. At the same time, research scientists of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center and the National Audubon Society will begin expanded studies of condor behavior, habitat, and ecology, and monitoring of the condor food supply for pesticide and other environmental contaminants. In cooperation with the California Department of Fish and Game, they will also measure pesticide levels in surrogate species such as the turkey vulture. The researchers will be assisted by technicians from the Forest Service, which will also provide equipment and other assistance as needed. The Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service will participate in field research, and will conduct inventories and special habitat studies. The Bureau of Land Management will provide personnel for short-term projects.

Other related work is also underway. The wing tags have been tested successfully on the closely related Andean condors at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center where 11 healthy chicks have been raised in a captive breeding program. Radio transmitters under consideration for use on the California condors will be tried on the Andeans later this month. This spring, radio-equipped Andean condors, captive reared at Patuxent and the Bronx Zoo, will be taken to South America and released in their native habitat where their ability to survive in the wild will be closely studied. This will provide important information for similar work later with the California condors.

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In addition, propagation facilities are now being constructed at the San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park where the first young condors taken into captivity under this expanded program will be housed. A second propagation facility is to be constructed later at Santa Cruz. The Los Angeles Zoo has the only California condor in captivity, a male named Topatopa. Biologists hope a mate can be found for this bird.

The multiagency cooperative agreement was made possible last month when Congress passed a $500,000 special appropriation to help finance the effort. The National Audubon Society will contribute a like amount over the next 5 years. The funds will be used to begin the full-scale rescue program of increased research, habitat protection, and captive propagation for the remaining condors.

The agreement will be signed by Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Frank Gregg, Director of the Bureau of Land Management; Max Peterson, Chief of U S D A 's Forest Service; Charles Fullerton, Director of the California Department of Fish and Game; and Russell Peterson, president of the National Audubon Society.

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