U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Statement on Vision for Eastern Migratory Population of Whooping Cranes

Questions and Answers

1. What is the Service recommending?

The Service is recommending implementation of rearing and release techniques of whooping cranes in the eastern United States that reduce artificiality and better mimic the natural conditions experienced by wild-hatched whooping cranes as closely as possible. This means moving away from methods that require greater exposure of cranes to humans and artificial conditions during rearing.

2. Why is the Service recommending a shift to less artificiality?

The Service believes that the main obstacle to establishing a self-sustaining population of whooping cranes in the eastern U.S. is lack of reproductive success. There are many factors that may contribute to the lack of success, and it is believed that the high degree of artificiality and/or human interaction in some methods may be a primary cause. The Service sees a benefit in exploring other types of rearing and release methods that are less artificial and provide more natural conditions for the cranes.

3. What evidence is there that reproductive success is low?

Since 2001, nearly 250 whooping cranes have been released into the Eastern Migratory Population. Of those, 93 survive today, including 27 reproductive pairs. This population has had 197 nests and hatched at least 63 colts, of which 10 survived to fledge. Today, there are only four wild-fledged cranes; two have had successful nests, and the other two are less than a year old.

4. What are some potential problems with artificial rearing and release methods?

We do not know how or when wild whooping cranes learn important behaviors or skills for survival, migration and reproduction. Therefore it is difficult to know how to "teach" these behaviors and skills to whooping cranes in captivity. The rearing and release methods currently in use may have unforeseen negative impacts preventing whooping cranes in the Eastern Migratory Population from successfully reproducing in the wild. Similar concerns have been raised in response to poor reproduction in the non-migratory Florida flock of whooping cranes and with Mississippi sandhill cranes. To minimize the potential negative impacts, the Service feels it is prudent to minimize artificiality of the rearing methods. Unless we can ensure that released birds possess the learned behaviors to successfully reproduce, this population will never become self-sustaining.

5. What are some of the methods that require a higher degree of exposure to humans and/or artificial conditions?

All rearing and release methods have some degree of artificiality; however, ultralight-led rearing and release and directed migration is more artificial than other release methods such as direct autumn releases and parent rearing.

6. Does this mean there will no longer be ultralight-led flights of whooping cranes in the eastern U.S.?

The Service believes that ultralight-led flights should be phased out, based on the best science available, and that priority should be placed on release methods (direct autumn release, parent rearing) that more closely mimic natural conditions. Other methods can accomplish the same results with less exposure to humans.

7. Don't these other methods also involve some artificiality?

All captive rearing and release methods involve some degree of artificiality, but methods such as direct autumn release and parent rearing are considerably less dependent on human interaction with the cranes than ultralight-led rearing and release methods. The Service recommends prioritizing allocation of eggs for use in methods with shorter periods of captivity and more limited exposure to costumed humans.

8. Why is the Service making these recommendations now?

The Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership, of which the Service is a member, is preparing to develop its next 5-year strategic plan. The Service believes that the effort to introduce whooping cranes onto the landscape in the eastern United States has been highly successful and is attributable in large part to directed migration. This method has also been instrumental in garnering public attention and support for whooping crane recovery. Using good science and an adaptive approach to management, the Service believes it is time to look ahead and address those issues that are affecting the success of the eastern migratory population to become self-sustaining. Additionally, beginning in 2016, there will be no allocation of eggs from the captive centers; all eggs for the Eastern Migratory Population will come from nests within Wisconsin.

9. When will the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership consider the Service's recommendations?

The partnership will meet in early 2016 and consider these recommendations along with others from the partners as they develop the next 5-year strategic plan.

10. What happens if the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership does not agree with the Service's recommendations?

The Service's vision document is a framework for WCEP's next 5-year strategic plan. It was released to afford all partners the opportunity to offer additional perspectives. It is anticipated that partners will discuss these recommendations, along with others, during development of the strategic plan. As with all efforts that rely on adaptive management as a project progresses, strategies may be added, deleted or modified as the partnership deems most beneficial to the

program. All WCEP partners provide valuable contributions to the effort and will continue to fill important roles within this reintroduction project. Roles of partners may change as we explore alternatives and options.