



World's last wild migrating whooping cranes threatened by Alberta's oil sands developments

The archetypal symbol of North American conservation is not adequately considered in government approvals for oil sands developments

Edmonton, July 11 2011. The world's last wild migrating endangered whooping cranes – 270 birds – are threatened by oil sands developments in northern Alberta, according to a recent report by Global Forest Watch Canada (GFWC), *“Migration of whooping cranes (Grus americana) through Alberta's bitumen sands region.”*

The not-for-profit research organization says that whooping cranes have regularly flown over and landed within Alberta's oil sands region. This migration includes areas leased to and developed by oil sands companies, and includes the surface mineable area containing facilities, mine pits and more than 170 km² of toxic tailings ponds. Annual overall bird mortality at these toxic tailings ponds in northeastern Alberta has been recently scientifically estimated at a minimum of 458 to 5,029 birds.

The only remaining self-sustaining wild population of whooping cranes in the world breeds in Wood Buffalo National Park, located in the Northwest Territories and northern Alberta, and consists of only 270 birds as of 2008.

“The whooping crane is an archetypal symbol of North American conservation,” says Peter Lee, author and executive director of Global Forest Watch Canada. “The magnificent bird is endangered in both Canada and the United States, and exists only in North America. Still, there is little evidence that the Governments of Alberta and Canada have adequately considered whooping cranes in the approval of industrial developments in Alberta's oil sands region.”

“The rapid pace and large scale of Alberta's oil sands industrial developments within the flight path of migrating whooping cranes raises the concern that damage may already be done. Considering the endangered status of whooping crane and its central place in North American conservation, it is imperative that adequate information about the conservation needs of whooping cranes are dealt with explicitly in land use plans, environmental impact assessments and approvals for industrial developments. This is not the case so far.”

“The Kearl Lake and Jocelyn North Mine oil sands projects are two recent examples of major project approvals where whooping cranes were given only cursory, inadequate treatment in the environmental impacts assessments and joint panel decisions,” Lee states.

The threat to the survival and recovery of the Canadian wild whooping crane population results from several factors present in the oil sands region. Exposure to tailings ponds represents a risk of oiling and ingestion of toxins. This exposure may result in direct mortality or reduced fitness for birds that continue migration. Exposure to air emissions, food web contaminants, and declining water quality as well as exposure to the expanding power line infrastructure also represent risks.

Proper management of the endangered species is hampered by a lack of sufficient credible scientific monitoring of the bird's migration, landing, and mortality.

Canada's Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada designated whooping cranes as endangered in 2000, and the species is currently listed as Endangered on Schedule 1 of Canada's *Species at Risk Act*. The species is protected in Canada under the *Migratory Birds Convention Act*, *National Parks Act*, *Canada Wildlife Act*, and *Species at Risk Act*, as well as by provincial and territorial wildlife acts. In Alberta, the whooping crane is currently ranked 'At Risk,' meaning the species is in danger of local extinction. The *Alberta Wildlife Act* lists the whooping crane as endangered. It is protected in the United States by the *Migratory Bird Treaty Act* and the *Endangered Species Act*

Download the report at: www.globalforestwatch.ca

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