

1. BACKGROUND

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) listed the whooping crane (*Grus americana*) as threatened with extinction in 1967 and endangered in 1970. Both listings were “grandfathered” into the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Canada designated the whooping crane as endangered in 1978. The International Whooping Crane Recovery Team (IWCRT), consisting of five Canadian and five United States (U.S.) members, oversees recovery objectives and strategies for the endangered whooping crane. This team recommended the restoration of a migratory, self-sustaining whooping crane population to eastern North America as described in the 2006 International Whooping Crane Recovery Plan (CWS & USFWS, 2006). During its January 2001 meeting, the Recovery Team recommended that Operation Migration staff use their pioneered technique to teach migration routes to birds using ultralight aircraft, to reintroduce a migratory population of whooping cranes to Eastern North America. Operation Migration by this date, had already successfully conducted similar migrations in experimental studies with Canada geese and sandhill cranes.

1.1 WHOOPING CRANE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

Organized in 1999, the founding members of the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership (WCEP), a partnership with nine government and private sector organizations (over 70 people), were charged with the mission of restoring a second self-sustaining migratory population. Achievement of this mission will bring the whooping crane closer to delisting from the Federal List of Threatened and Endangered Species.

Founding WCEP members included the USFWS, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WI DNR), International Crane Foundation (ICF), Operation Migration, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, USGS National Wildlife Health Center, IWCRT, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin. Since its inception, other strategic partners in the restoration effort include the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and states and organizations along the Atlantic and Mississippi flyways (migration routes).

In September 2003, WCEP suggested development of a state comprehensive Whooping Crane Management Plan (the plan) to attain the 2020 recovery goal of a self-sustaining eastern migratory population of 100-120 whooping cranes consisting of 25-30 breeding pairs that regularly nest and fledge offspring (CWS & USFWS, 2006). The plan might also serve as a template for management plans in other eastern states and provinces as needed. This document is a result of extensive WCEP collaboration.