

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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## EMERGENCY ACTION TO PROTECT ENDANGERED CRANE ORDERED

In its first action exercising the emergency provision of the 1973 Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on June 30 issued emergency regulations, effective immediately, to protect the endangered Mississippi sandhill crane by legally designating its living space as "critical habitat."

A highway construction project in Mississippi threatens the crane's existence.

The regulations will remain effective for 120 days. They make it clear to all Federal agencies that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considers this tract of land "critical" to the survival of the bird. Under Section 7 of the Act, Federal agencies must ensure that actions undertaken or authorized by them do not modify or destroy such habitat.

Now that the emergency regulations have been promulgated and are in force, the normal public participation process will get underway and full consultation with other agencies and citizens interested in this matter will be sought.

In the next few days the Director will publish in the Federal Register a notice of proposed rulemaking delineating critical habitat for the Mississippi sandhill crane during this 120-day emergency period. Comments are requested from the public and other concerned Federal and State agencies and private interests. They should be addressed to the Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, D.C. 20240. All comments received through September 10 will be considered.

(over)

The Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that a five-sided area of land, water, and airspace in Jackson County, Mississippi, between the West Pascagoula River and the Jackson-Harrison County line is critical habitat for the Mississippi sandhill crane (Grus canadensis pulla).

This space is the last remaining area containing the only known population of this bird, which is non-migratory and confines its movements largely within the boundaries indicated.

An emergency exists which poses a significant risk to the well-being of the Mississippi sandhill crane. Current estimates indicate that only 38 to 40 Mississippi sandhill cranes remain in the wild and that they survive only in this critical habitat.

The maintenance of significant portions of this habitat and the well-being of the crane are threatened by construction of a new segment of Interstate Highway I-10 between Mississippi State Highway 57 and the Pascagoula River.

Contracts have been let for construction of this portion of I-10 through the critical habitat. Such construction will begin upon Federal Highway Administration approval of the contracts already let by the State.

The construction activities, destruction of habitat, incidental intrusions, and subsequent related commercial and residential development of the area all have been determined to constitute a significant risk to the well-being of the crane.

Because some of these activities are likely to take place before this habitat could be assessed and determined to be critical under the regular rulemaking procedures set out in the Act, the emergency rulemaking authority of the Act was invoked by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.