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Switch to underground cable benefits whooping cranes

FEMA, Fish and Wildlife Service officials cite benefits of converting power lines

An effort to replace North Dakota power lines knocked out by storms last winter with underground cable has proven to have a secondary benefit: reducing the mortality of endangered whooping cranes.

By: [Brad Dokken](#), Grand Forks Herald

An effort to replace North Dakota power lines knocked out by storms last winter with underground cable has proven to have a secondary benefit: reducing the mortality of endangered whooping cranes.

After storms last winter took down thousands of power poles, the Federal Emergency Management Agency revised its criteria for replacing the damaged lines, encouraging rural electric cooperatives to bury wires whenever possible.

So far this year, FEMA has provided funding to bury 22 miles of line across the state in the wake of damage caused by storms in January and April, the agency said in a news release. According to a FEMA spokeswoman in Bismarck, the new underground lines are located in Grant, Oliver, Morton, Burleigh and Adams counties. The segments vary from as little as one mile to as long as seven miles.

"Whenever there is an opportunity to bury a damaged transmission line instead of returning it to an overhead location, we prefer to bury it," FEMA mitigation specialist Dave Lucas said in a statement. "From a mitigation standpoint, once the line is buried, the risk of future damage is greatly reduced if not eliminated.

"Any benefit above and beyond that is icing on the cake."

New consideration

FEMA's primary goal is to help storm-damaged communities recover, but the whooping cranes' migratory path now is an environmental consideration, the agency said.

FEMA consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which concurred that burying the lines benefits the cranes. Service officials say collisions with power lines are the No. 1 source of mortality in whooping crane chicks.

"When descending or taking off, the cranes are often unable to avoid power lines," Jeffrey Towner, field supervisor with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office in Bismarck, said in a statement. "Their large body is not so maneuverable, and visibility may be limited during inclement weather or low light conditions."

Towner was not immediately available for comment today on the specific number of whooping cranes that die from power line collisions in North Dakota.

At one time there were more than 10,000 whooping cranes in North America, but drought, loss of habitat, shootings, strikes on obstructions and other hazards combined to greatly reduce the population.

By 1940, only 16 whoopers remained in the wild. Today, the country's only self-sustaining flock in the wild has 247 birds. The cranes' migratory path, which takes them from the Texas Gulf Coast to northern Canada, spans most of North Dakota.

Scientists estimate thousands of various bird species are killed by encounters with transmission and distribution power lines.

"Burying lines is a benefit to most any bird species," Towner said.

Report crane sightings

Whooping cranes now are in their fall migration, and sightings will increase as the endangered birds make their way through North Dakota during the next several weeks. Wildlife officials are asking anyone who spots whooping cranes to report the sightings so the birds can be tracked.

Whoopers stand about 5 feet tall and have a wingspan of about 7 feet from tip to tip. They are bright white with black wing tips, which are visible only when the wings are outspread. In flight, whooping cranes extend their long necks straight forward, while their long, slender legs extend out behind the tail.

Young-of-the-year whoopers are white with scattered brown feathers. Whooping cranes typically migrate alone or in groups of two to three birds and may be associated with sandhill cranes.

Other white birds such as snow geese, swans and egrets often are mistaken for whooping cranes. The most common mistake is pelicans because their wingspan is similar and they tuck their pouch in flight, leaving a silhouette similar to a crane when viewed from below.

Anyone sighting whooping cranes should not disturb them but record the date, time, location and the birds' activity. Observers also should look for and report colored bands, which may occur on one or both legs.

Young whooping cranes were marked with colored leg bands from 1975 to 1988 to help determine their identity.

To report a whooping crane sighting, call the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office in Bismarck at (701) 387-4397, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's main office in Bismarck at (701) 328-6300 or contact local game wardens around the state.

