

The Threat of the Proposed Harbor Island Development to the Aransas-Wood Buffalo Wild Whooping Crane Flock

By Jim Blackburn

There are at least three major activities that are being pursued in and around Harbor Island and Port Aransas. These activities are described below and pose a direct risk to the Aransas-Wood Buffalo wild whooping crane flock. These activities should be opposed as proposed and either abandoned or restructured to eliminate the potential of harm to these wonderful endangered birds.

There are two important issues here. First, the whooping crane flock is growing and expanding beyond traditional territories within or even near Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. The birds are moving both northward into the Matagorda Bay system, westward along Copano Bay and south down San Jose Island and across the Corpus Christi Ship Channel to Mustang Island on the backside of Port Aransas. As can be seen from Figure 1, these birds are proximate to the ship channel, an important fact that is discussed in later sections.



Figure 1. Whooping crane pair adjacent to the Corpus Christi Ship Channel

There are three major new activities proposed in the immediate vicinity of the whoopers shown above as well as a couple of other pairs. First, the Port of Corpus Christi is proposing to deepen the Corpus Christi Ship Channel from about 50 feet to about 80 feet. This will allow supertankers to come in through the jetties at Port Aransas to Harbor Island. Additionally, two major terminal development projects have been proposed on Harbor Island that would serve these supertankers and load them with oil to be exported to overseas markets. Further, there is a desalination plant proposed for Harbor Island that would discharge its reject brine directly into the ship channel. Together, these three projects represent a bona fide threat to the wintering whooping cranes. The location of the three proposed projects are shown in Figure 2.

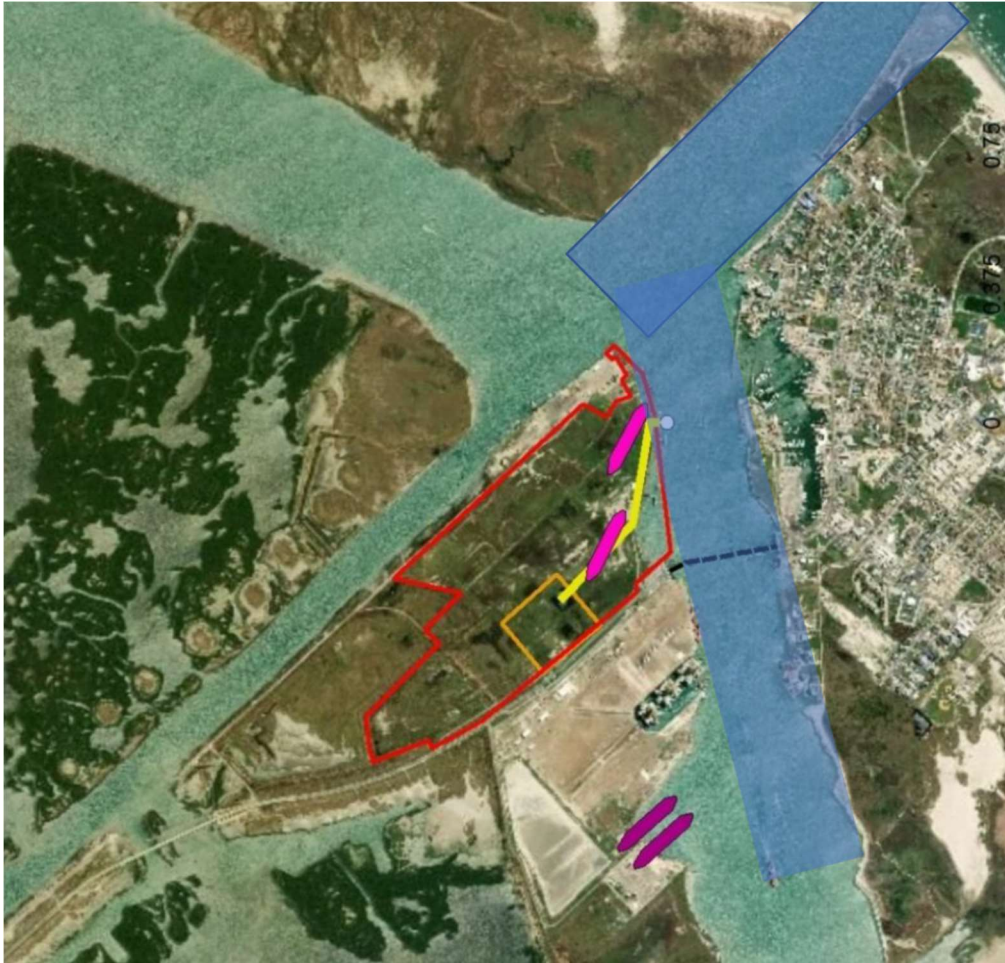


Figure 2. The proposed Harbor Island developments are show including the dredging project to deepen the Corpus Christi Ship Channel (blue), the two tanker terminal projects (4 berths total) shown in pink and purple and the route of the desalination discharge pipe in yellow. The ferry crossing into Port Aransas is shown as the black dotted line.

The problems here are severalfold and involve both a risk of direct harm to the whooping cranes using Port Aransas and San Jose Island and indirect harm due to impact to blue crabs, the major food source of the whooping crane flock. I believe that this risk is sufficient to raise the potential of jeopardy to the cranes under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act as discussed below.

The potential deepening of the ship channel will allow larger crude carriers to come in through the pass and load on Harbor Island. Here, the key issue is the risk of an oil spill from a collision between a tanker maneuvering full of crude and other traffic is increased. Not only is this the Corpus Christi Ship Channel, but it is also the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (GIWW) which continues north along the San Jose shoreline into Aransas Bay and points north. The GIWW has significant tug and barge traffic with petrochemicals and aggregate, and the ferry crossing is right in the middle of this situation. If such a spill were to occur during the wintering season, multiple birds would be in the pathway of harm as the oil would move with the tide which is very strong coming in through the jetties and dispersing the oil northward as well as onto the marshland behind Port Aransas where the cranes in Figure 1 winter.

Second, consider the impact of discharge of brine material into the channel adjacent to the pass into the Gulf of Mexico. This brine is toxic to juvenile marine life. Under regulation, a mixing zone is allowed before toxicity becomes an issue. Of particular concern is the impact of this “mixing zone” on larval blue crab. Blue crabs migrate into the Gulf to lay their eggs and their larvae come back into the bay to mature. In their early stages, these larvae are planktonic and must depend upon the tide to move them into the bay. When the tide goes out, they will drop to the floor of the channel and secure themselves until the tide reverses. In this way, these larval blue crabs will enter the toxic mixing zone, and the food supply of the cranes, and therefore the cranes, will be harmed.

There are solutions to each of these problems. First, the brine discharge can be routed out several miles into the Gulf, away from the

fish pass. Here, the mixing zone issue is much less focused than it is in the pass which is the corridor for all marine organisms moving to and from the bay. Second, an alternative exists to the deep channel in the form of an offshore monobuoy terminal. Such monobuoys have been operated safely around the world and would provide a least damaging alternative to the destruction and risk associated with dredging a deeper channel and building terminals onshore. Given the current economic situation, the need for multiple export facilities is highly unlikely. By pursuing the least damaging alternative, the potential harm of the deep channel generally and specifically to the whoopers is significantly reduced.

In conclusion, I ask that the International Crane Foundation move forward in opposition to the deepening of the Corpus Christi Ship Channel, to oppose the two terminal projects and to oppose the discharge of brine into the Corpus Christi Ship Channel. If ICF agrees to this, I volunteer to draft documents with permit numbers and requests for action and submit them to numerous responsible parties and to the media.