

STATEMENT OF E.U. CURTIS BOHLEN, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE AND PARKS, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUB-COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS, HOUSE INTERIOR AND INSULAR AFFAIRS COMMITTEE, ON H.R. 3508 AND OTHER BILLS TO DESIGNATE CERTAIN LANDS IN THE FORT NIOBRARA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE AS WILDERNESS, July 29, 1976.

It is with pleasure that I recommend enactment of H.R. 3508 (Sec. 1(a)(23)) and H.R. 5893 (Sec. (a)(17)) which would establish wilderness on the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge.

The Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1912 by Executive Order 1461. The primary goal of the refuge was to preserve and protect the bison which at that time were in danger of extinction. Early in 1912, Mr. J.W. Gilbert offered six bison, seventeen elk and two white-tailed deer to the Federal Government for preservation with the understanding they would remain in Nebraska. There were no Federal funds available for fencing the refuge at the time, and the citizens of Valentine, Nebraska, generously offered to assist in construction of a fence around 213 acres of pasture. In 1936, six Texas longhorn cattle were transferred to the refuge from the Wichita Mountains Refuge in Oklahoma. Since the first introductions, active herds of bison, elk and longhorns have been maintained on the refuge.

The bison, truly a symbol of American heritage, has been successfully managed, and a herd of approximately 225 is maintained on the refuge. There are about 230 Texas longhorn cattle maintained on the refuge and elk number about 40. There are both deer and antelope on the area.

The refuge is within the Niobrara River Basin, the geographic center of the vast Missouri River Basin. The Niobrara River divides the refuge into two well defined units. The area north of the river is high bench land. Six deep canyons divide the bench land diagonally from northwest to southeast. The northern area contains approximately 4,550 acres.

The portion south of the refuge contains about 13,000 acres and is comprised of loose, sandy soil that supports moderate stands of mixed short and tall prairie grasses.

The climate is one of considerable variation. Winters are cold while summers are quite warm. Temperatures may vary between minus 38 degrees to a 110 degrees with an annual precipitation of about 17 inches.

Recreational opportunities at Fort Niobrara are almost exclusively oriented to wildlife in the wildlands of the area. In 1972 over 63,000 visitors came to the refuge. Most visitors come to see the bison, elk and Texas longhorn in their native environment. The headquarters exhibition pasture provides an excellent opportunity to see a few of each of the animals. Popular spring and early summer activities include canoeing and floating the Niobrara River which remains in a natural state.

The area recommended for wilderness designation is located on the north portion of the refuge and includes approximately 4,635 acres in a single unit. We recommend the Niobrara River be included in the wilderness proposal, and it will serve as the main access for the public to enter

the wilderness. There are only minor man-made objects contained within the wilderness proposal such as fences. The area serves as a winter pasture for the buffalo herd, and it will be necessary that we maintain the boundary fence and treat or salvage diseased or disabled bison. Most of this work can be done by horseback but on occasion it may be necessary to use motorized equipment. We feel that this wilderness area is unique and well deserving of wilderness status.

This concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have. Thank you.