

WHITE RIVER WILDERNESS STUDY

PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

The White River Wilderness Study and the conclusion of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife that none of the refuge qualifies for wilderness designation under the provisions of the Wilderness Act have resulted in significant public response. A total of 371 oral or written statements and petitions are included in the wilderness record. A total of 91 individuals attended the public hearing, 78 signed attendance cards, and 27 testified during the hearing. Of the 371 statements received, including those by mail and presented during the public hearing, 186 supported wilderness for approximately 5,000 acres, 181 opposed wilderness for any part of the refuge and 4 were noncommittal. Many of those who supported wilderness for 5,000 acres also urged the Bureau to establish other "administrative wilderness areas" throughout the refuge. Those individuals, groups, and organizations who support these "administrative wilderness areas" hope that in time these areas would be recommended to Congress as suitable for wilderness designation. Those favoring the 5,000 acre wilderness proposal include the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission and Governor Dale Bumpers.

The Bureau's White River Wilderness Study and the resulting conclusion that none of the refuge qualifies for wilderness designation was based on a detailed review of the numerous facts and figures that have been accumulated during the 37 year history of the refuge, management objectives of the refuge, land use and timber harvest practices of prior owners and experience gained in reviewing and processing other proposals under the provisions of the Wilderness Act.

The information presented before, during and subsequent to the White River Hearing by individuals, groups, or organizations is not adequately substantial, in our view, to support a modification of the Bureau's original nonsuitable conclusion.

The 1,000 acre Scrub Grass Bayou Research Natural Area and approximately 4,000 acres of bottomland hardwood south of Jacks Bay extending to Swan Lake are the specific areas wilderness proponents are currently recommending for wilderness consideration. With the exception of some mature persimmon trees harvested from the 4,000-acre unit, neither of these areas has been cut in the history of the refuge's forest management program. The 4,000 acre unit is definitely an active component in that program and was scheduled to be cut in 1972. Of course, both units were regularly high-graded before the refuge existed; and this was a consideration in our declaring them unsuitable for wilderness designation.

From other than primarily an emotional view, i.e., "we need some wilderness on White River Refuge", proponents of wilderness primarily have criticized the refuge, particularly the forestry management program. It is quite apparent that the majority of these advocates are not familiar with nor do they grasp the biological basis, the legislative constraints, and the goals of the management programs. Many enjoy the multitudes of wildlife that inhabit the area and relish the beauty of the productive forests on White River Refuge, but seem not to equate these assets with our management activities.

We remain of the opinion that none of White River Refuge truly qualifies for wilderness designation under the provisions of The Wilderness Act. However, the Bureau also understands and appreciates the fact that numerous individuals, groups, and organizations are interested in seeing a portion, regardless of its qualifications, of White River Refuge included in the National Wilderness Preservation System. A 5,000-acre wilderness area on White River Refuge would not significantly harm or hinder the overall refuge management objectives. If the Congress of the United States in its ultimate wisdom concludes that the 5,000 acres proposed for wilderness by the many proponents thereof, are sufficiently "suitable" to become a unit of National Wilderness Preservation System, the Bureau will, of course, fully support that decision and will insure the preservation of its wilderness-like attributes.