

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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STATEMENT OF SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR ROGERS C. B. MORTON
ON THE DECEMBER 1974 WILDERNESS MESSAGE, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Today the Administration is sending to the Congress wilderness recommendations covering 38 national parks, forests, and wildlife refuges. This submission rounds out one phase of the wilderness program: we have now essentially completed the review of the park, forest, and wildlife refuge systems called for by the Wilderness Act. It has been my pleasure as Secretary of the Interior to work on five wilderness messages, covering the majority of the Department's wilderness recommendations.

The recommendations which are going forward today would add more than 9 million acres to the National Wilderness Preservation System. This system, established by Congress in 1964, comprises designated Federal lands which are "untrammelled by man" and where "man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

The vast tracts of land across the country which are recommended for wilderness designation have strikingly different climates and ecosystems. But all of them share a few important elements of wilderness character: they are pristine lands, virtually untouched by man; they provide habitats for wildlife, including many threatened species; they can best serve the national interest in being set apart to retain their integrity. Viewed in this light, there is a striking unity between, for example, the beach-dune area in the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge just north of Boston and the parched desert of Death Valley National Monument in California and Nevada. Once they are designated as wilderness, both areas will serve as living museums, where visitors can recapture the sense of wonder and freedom that similar areas inspired in our forebears. They are areas where the New World is still new.

The West, of course, is blessed with an abundance of wild undeveloped lands. But it is especially heartening to note the large amount of land in the East which is included in today's proposals: more than 1.7 million acres in eight states. These areas--plus the sixteen additional ones proposed in the Administration's eastern wilderness bill--will provide much-needed opportunities for primitive recreation and solitude in the eastern United States.

Five additional proposals are being transmitted without a recommendation: Kofa Game Range, Arizona; Sheldon National Antelope Range, Nevada and Oregon; Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Range, Montana; Nunivak National Wildlife Range, Alaska; and Lake Mead National Recreation Area, Nevada and Arizona. Much of the surface land in these areas has wilderness potential. But the first three areas are open to mining and may contain minerals that are in short supply. I do not believe we have enough mineral survey data at this time to make an informed recommendation on these proposals. We will seek the authorization and appropriation of funds necessary to survey these areas thoroughly, and we recommend that Congress defer action on the three proposals until we have done so. Since virtually the entire Lake Mead National Recreation Area is subject to power withdrawals, we have recommended that Congress defer any action on this proposal for a period of 3 years, pending a study by the Bureau of Reclamation of Western Power needs. With respect

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to the Nunivak National Wildlife Refuge, the uncertainties of land ownership and the unique management needs for reindeer and muskox on the Island have prompted us to recommend a deferral pending the completion of Native land selections pursuant to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

I pointed out in my remarks on the last set of recommendations, earlier this summer, that the Congress has fallen far behind in enacting laws designating wilderness areas. The attention of the Congress--and the nation as a whole--has understandably been riveted on other, momentous matters since that time. But now with a new Administration and a fresh outlook on national affairs, it is my hope that the Congress will begin to deal with the wilderness backlog. I cannot think of a better way for us all to demonstrate our devotion to continuity and domestic tranquility than to turn our attention to the timeless values of wilderness.

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