

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE STEPS UP BIOLOGICAL FIELD WORK

The Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service is gearing up for a major expansion and realignment of its biological field studies to help supply decision-makers with more options in considering proposals to develop energy and other natural resources.

In announcing this accelerated effort, Lynn A. Greenwalt, Fish and Wildlife Service Director, said, "The sheer magnitude of development projects, the complexity of technologies, and the required quality of information demanded by society for assessments are simply overrunning our present capabilities. Subjective estimates of potential environmental degradation are not enough. Natural living resources must be well represented at the time decisions are made on technology and siting."

The stepped-up field work will support the accelerated pace of exploration for new energy sources under President Nixon's "Project Independence," which seeks to make the Nation independent of insecure overseas energy supplies in the 1980's.

Greenwalt noted that the Fish and Wildlife Service for many years has been doing biological field work in many energy-related areas--evaluating effects of powerplant construction, river dredging, stream alteration, and coastal-marine development, all of which are expanding at a rapid rate.

The growing body of environmental laws of recent years now requires biological assessments of all new federally-involved development projects. The lion's share of this field work has fallen on the Fish and Wildlife Service because the investigations all must evaluate the proposed project's effect on fish and wildlife as a first step.

The specific processes that Greenwalt outlined include:

- ... identifying ecosystems subject to rapid degradation from gradual encroachment or massive development,
- ... determining key ecosystem interrelationships and key environmental indicators,
- ... establishing biological baselines for initial impact assessment,

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... monitoring feedback of development impacts,

... speeding up the preparation of environmental assessments and environmental impact assessments.

The announcement by Greenwalt anticipates higher demand for biological field assessments in three areas, and his actions include setting up teams to handle each.

The first team will deal with upland ecosystems, which translates into investigating oil shale and coal mining projects, geothermal development proposals, and associated water use demands.

The second team, aquatic ecosystems, will devote full attention to coastal and marine development projects, power plant siting, and stream alteration projects across the Nation.

The third group of scientists, inventory and systems development, will serve as systems analysts for the others by analyzing basic scientific data, managing a long-term statistical environmental indicators project, maintaining a national wetlands inventory, and assuring a smooth flow of scientific data to users.

As examples of expected increased demands, Greenwalt cited oil and gas development. "The accelerated program of 10 million leased acres in one year on the Outer Continental Shelf, and the related urban and industrial development of pipelines, tank farms, refineries, and port facilities will put unprecedented pressures on aquatic life."

He said, "Coastal ecosystems, including the Great Lakes and tidal wetlands, estuaries, and marshlands, are being altered by man at an alarming rate. These coastal areas support much of the Nation's fishery resources by supplying nutrients and life support requirements. Coastal areas also serve as nesting, feeding, and resting areas for migratory birds, furbearers, and sea mammals as well as many threatened or endangered species."

In discussing powerplant construction, Greenwalt said, "It is anticipated that by the year 2000 the Nation will have a need for 1,200,000 megawatts of electricity. This will be met, in part, through the construction of nearly 300 fossil-fueled and 1,000 nuclear-fueled powerplants, in addition to the 356 powerplants now in operation. Many of the planned powerplants will be proposed for location next to biologically productive lakes, streams, and estuaries. Extensive land acreage will be required for plant construction and massive water volumes may be needed for cooling purposes. The challenge, therefore, will be to minimize the damage to fish and wildlife habitat and to use the surplus heat to biological advantage.

"The biological services effort is an attempt to make a quantum leap ahead so we can provide quality biological information in a timely manner. Environmental concerns could then be addressed before a crisis develops . . . in the blueprint planning stage rather than at the bulldozer and picket line, where we so often find ourselves today."

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