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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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REVISED OIL AND GAS LEASING CODE PROTECTS WILDLIFE

In a move designed to strengthen protection of wildlife refuges for wildlife purposes, Secretary of the Interior Douglas McKay today announced an amendment to the code of Federal regulations dealing with oil and gas leases on national wildlife refuges.

In announcing code revisions Secretary McKay pointed out that the new regulations provide that areas indispensable for the protection and preservation of rare and endangered species, remnant big-game herds and irreplaceable examples of unique plants for animal ecology--such as the Arkansas whooping crane wintering area and Red Rock Lakes, homes of the Trumpeter swan--are not available for leasing at any time or under any conditions.

He further pointed out that in those refuge areas where gas and oil leasing will be permitted the wildlife values are given first consideration. In those areas prospecting, leasing and operating will be done only in the places, at the times and under the conditions specified by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"These stringent provisions are designed to assure the wildlife values of each refuge maximum protection and I propose to see that these conditions are rigidly enforced" the Secretary said.

The amended code has the effect of canceling the stop-order on leasing on national wildlife refuges. This order was issued more than two years ago to give the Secretary and other officials of the Department time to make a thorough study of the problems relative to leasing on such areas. It was felt at that time that existing regulations did not provide the refuges with adequate protection. During the intervening months numerous conferences of specialists have been held and after full consideration the amendments were prepared and adopted.

That section of the regulation specifying that no leasing of any kind will be permitted on the irreplaceable areas is brief and very specific. The section pertaining to the conditions under which leases may be issued goes into more detail concerning the Fish and Wildlife Service's obligation to give wildlife values first consideration in making any decisions.

That part of the regulation sets forth that "on those areas designated by the Fish and Wildlife Service as wilderness, recreational water development or marsh, with respect to which the Fish and Wildlife Service reports that oil and gas developments might seriously impair or destroy the usefulness of the lands for wildlife conservation purposes, no leases will be issued unless a complete and detailed

operating plan for the area, which will insure full protection for the particular values for which established, is approved by the Director, Fish and Wildlife Service".

The regulation further provides that pending applications must be amended to fit new conditions within six months or be canceled.

To further assure that any leasing operation will not in any way injure or impair the conservation values of the refuges the regulation specifies that "geological and geophysical prospecting conducted on leased premises shall be of a type and at a time satisfactory to the Fish and Wildlife Service."

No drilling operations shall be conducted under a lease until the lease has been committed to a unit plan, except that the Secretary may, if necessary to protect the interests of the United States, require or permit drilling when a unit plan cannot be obtained.

The regulations also state that when a unit agreement includes land administered by the Fish and Wildlife Service no drilling operations may be conducted on the utilized portion of the Government-leased lands administered for wildlife conservation "without the consent and approval of the Fish and Wildlife Service as to the time, place and nature of such operations".

A final protective block is the stipulation that "in every instance a plan of development which includes lands administered for wildlife conservation shall not be approved without the concurrence of the Fish and Wildlife Service".

Provision is also made that lessees are fully bound by State and Federal fish and game laws.

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