

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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ENDANGERED SPECIES COMMITTEE SETS FIRST MEETING FOR JAN. 23 ON TELLICO, GRAYROCKS

The new Congressionally-created Endangered Species Committee will meet for the first time at 9 a.m. January 23 to decide whether the Tellico Dam in Tennessee and/or the Grayrocks Project in Wyoming shall be exempted from the requirements of the Endangered Species Act.

Secretary of the Interior Cecil D. Andrus, in his capacity as chairman of the Committee, scheduled the public meeting for the Interior Department Auditorium in Washington, D. C. Under the Endangered Species Act Amendments passed by Congress last October, the Committee is required to decide on the Tellico and Grayrocks Projects by February 8.

The 1978 Amendments designated the Interior Secretary as chairman, and specified that the other members would be the Secretary of the Army, Secretary of Agriculture, Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, Administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and one representative of each State affected by the project under consideration. The State representatives are nominated by the Governor and appointed by the President.

The Committee has the duty to resolve conflicts that persist after the usual process of consultation between the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service or the National Marine Fisheries Service and other Federal agencies which have proposed projects considered by USFWS or NMFS to "jeopardize the continued existence of an endangered or threatened species or result in the adverse modification or destruction of a critical habitat."

To decide to exempt such a project, the Committee must determine that, first, there are no reasonable and prudent alternatives; second, that the benefits of the project clearly outweigh those of alternative courses of action, and are in the public interest; third, that the project is of regional or national significance. The 1978 Amendments also require that when an exemption is granted, the Committee shall establish "such reasonable mitigation and enhancement measures as are necessary and appropriate to minimize the adverse effects" upon the species or habitat involved.

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Grayrocks and Tellico are the only projects specifically mentioned by name in the 1978 Amendments, which require that the Committee make its decision on them within 90 days after the effective date of that law, signed by President Carter November 10, 1978. A specific application for exemption will be required of future projects before they may be considered by the Committee.

Grayrocks is a part of the Missouri Basin Power Project situated near Wheatland, Wyoming. The Grayrocks Dam and Reservoir would provide cooling water for three 500-megawatt, coal-fired generating plants being built with the assistance of the Rural Electrification Administration. The dam and reservoir, to be built by the Army Corps of Engineers, would store water from the Laramie River, which is a tributary of the Platte River. Parts of the Platte River Basin downstream in adjoining Nebraska have been designated as critical habitat for the endangered whooping crane. Opponents of Grayrocks have contended that the dam, by withholding water from the Platte, would alter the river basin so as to affect whooping crane habitat adversely.

The Tellico project is better known because it made the snail darter famous. In a widely-publicized U. S. Supreme Court decision last June, the Tennessee Valley Authority was ordered not to close the gates on its nearly completed Tellico Dam on the Little Tennessee River because of jeopardy to the endangered three-inch fish, which is known to occur naturally only in that river. TVA's biologists believe enough snail darters have been transplanted to the nearby Hiwassee River to assure the species' survival, but Fish and Wildlife Service biologists are not convinced this will prove true.

The Committee sponsored public hearings January 8 in Washington and in Knoxville, Tenn., and Cheyenne, Wyo., to elicit information and public comment which might help its members decide on the two projects.

President Carter has designated William R. Willis, Jr., a Nashville, Tenn., attorney, as his State's representative on the Committee for consideration of the Tellico issue. He has appointed Governor Ed Herschler to represent Wyoming on the Grayrocks case, along with Paul Snyder, an Assistant Attorney General of Nebraska, to represent that State's interests.

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