

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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## SUIT DROPPED AGAINST FEDERAL WILDLIFE AID PROGRAM

The 15-month lawsuit against the Federal aid program to States for conducting wildlife conservation projects has been voluntarily dropped for at least a year by two animal welfare groups, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Lynn A. Greenwalt announced today. The lawsuit had charged that administration of the 1937 Pittman-Robertson program was not in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act.

"We are pleased to have the Federal grant-in-aid program out of the courtroom and back in the full-time business of helping wildlife and habitat conservation," Greenwalt said. "A number of changes have been made in our procedures that reflect our primary concern--carrying out the purposes of the program in full compliance with NEPA."

In addition to suspending their challenge to the national program, the Committee for Humane Legislation and Friends of Animals also agreed not to challenge this year's funding of State projects, most of which began on July 1. In return, the Interior agency agreed to summarize the 182 State projects that were challenged in notices placed in local newspapers and in the Federal Register.

Each notice will include a brief summary of the project in that area, announce that an environmental assessment is available, and that the project has been found to have "no significant impact on the human environment."

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Although there is a 30-day public comment period, funding of this year's projects will not be affected. Service officials estimated this year's cost of placing paid notices in the newspapers will be about \$100,000.

Notices will also be run in 1980 and 1981 on new projects that require an environmental assessment. In those years, the notices will solicit public comment at least 45 days before a decision is made on whether the project will have an impact on the environment, and prior to Federal funding.

District Court Judge Charles R. Richey approved the settlement agreement on June 26, 1979, and dismissed the lawsuit that began in March 1978. At the time the suit was filed, the Service was completing an environmental impact statement (EIS) on the national program but the plaintiffs then challenged the 614 ongoing State projects, claiming that each was a major Federal action that required an EIS. The number was later reduced to 182 and environmental assessments were provided to the plaintiffs. Environmental assessments are the initial documents required under NEPA and are the basis for deciding whether there will be a significant impact on the environment and whether a full EIS is needed.

The Pittman-Robertson Act established a continuing cooperative program between the Federal Government and the States for the selection, rehabilitation, and improvement of areas of land or water for wildlife restoration. Since 1938, more than \$882 million have been distributed to wildlife conservation agencies in the States, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Virgin Islands. The funds are derived from Federal excise taxes on sporting firearms, ammunition, hand guns, and archery equipment. In 1979, \$82.2 million was distributed to these agencies.