



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE AND O.S.M. COOPERATE ON COAL RESOURCE STUDIES IN INDIANA HABITAT AREA

Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Land & Minerals Management David C. O'Neal and Interior Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks Constance B. Harriman today announced their approval of a cooperative agreement to study plans for a proposed wildlife refuge in southern Indiana.

The cooperative agreement between Interior's Office of Surface Mining (OSM) and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service calls for a year-long study by OSM of coal reserves and related factors that will help the Fish and Wildlife Service plan potential boundaries.

The study area covers approximately 21,000 acres in Gibson and Pike Counties, site of the proposed Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge. The locale contains valuable migration and wintering habitat for wood ducks and other birds, thanks to wetlands and hardwood forest uplands.

Under the agreement, OSM will use readily available information on the thickness and location of coal deposits potentially impacted by the proposed national wildlife refuge. The study will estimate the volume of coal extractable by surface and underground mining. The information will help the Fish & Wildlife Service designate proposed refuge boundaries, prioritize property acquisition from willing sellers, and assess potential impacts from nearby coal mining and land reclamation.

Assistant Secretary Harriman said, "We need to know all we can about the location of coal reserves in the Patoka River area as we make boundary and operational decisions affecting the refuge proposal. Reclamation of previously mined land in the area has created some extremely productive wetland habitat, including one area that won an OSM award last year. The knowledge gained through these studies can help maximize future wildlife and outdoor recreation benefits resulting from reclamation on areas where coal extraction might occur."

(more)

Assistant Secretary O'Neal said, "Coal reserve information is critical in the Patoka River area, because some key wildlife habitat is interspersed with valuable coal-bearing land that could be expensive if the government had to buy it or compensate owners for coal that can't be mined. On the other hand, some of the area's best wetland habitat is on land that was previously mined and reclaimed. Therefore, detailed knowledge of the area's coal reserves and their value is important for environmental as well as economic reasons."

"The Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act prohibits surface coal mining in national wildlife refuges, unless the coal owners have valid existing rights," O'Neal said. "That makes it advisable to have a full set of facts on the value of the reserves and the likelihood of mining, before the refuge is created."

OSM administers national standards requiring environmental protection during coal mining and land reclamation afterward, and OSM reclaims abandoned mine lands. The agency provides support and oversight for approved State regulatory and reclamation programs, and directly carries out such activities on Federal and Indian lands. OSM was established in the Interior Department under authority of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977.

The Fish & Wildlife Service manages more than 450 national wildlife refuges to provide habitat for migratory birds, endangered species, and other wildlife and wildlife-oriented public recreation. It also sets migratory bird hunting regulations, leads national efforts to protect and restore endangered and threatened species, and administers federal grants for state fish and wildlife programs.