Wildlife Group Files Suit on Wilderness Access

The National Wildlife Federation is challenging the Interior Department's system for lifting restrictions on access to wilderness areas and other protected public lands. In a lawsuit filed 15 July in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, NWF charges that wildlife habitats, biological systems, and the natural beauty of lands in 17 states could be irreparably damaged by mining and other forms of development.

Affected by the legal action are 173 million acres that prior to 1976 were protected federal lands. Beginning with the Carter Administration, the government began to strip away this protected status by administrative action. NWF contends the department's actions are illegal because land-use planning and environmental studies were not conducted as required by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, or the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1977.

Interior officials contend the withdrawals were done in the "ordinary course of business"—that is, as part of routine reviews of wilderness and protected lands. Formal impact statements and land-use planning for individual withdrawals are not necessary, they add.

NWF, however, asserts that canceling land protections, when viewed collectively, can have major impacts in some areas. The effects of the withdrawals are not easily identified, says Norman Dean, NWF's counsel, because Interior handled them in a "piecemeal fashion." The changes in the affected properties' protective status were noted in 700 *Federal Register* notices dating back to January 1981, NWF says, but no opportunity for public comment was provided.

Spot checks, says Dean, indicate that rescinding protections on many of the affected lands will be harmful. The full extent of potential environmental damage, he adds, is not understood. "No private organization has the resources to do that kind of study," he says. "The law intended that Interior go out and determine the value of these systems. Our suit is aimed at making sure this job gets done."

NWF also wants Interior to follow administrative procedures. It contends that withdrawals of protective status on lands in 11 states were subject to presidential and congressional approval. Interior officials do not agree. However, in the wake of negotiations with NWF, which broke off in June, Interior in January began submitting some withdrawals to the Office of Management and Budget for review.

The NWF challenge, which has been under preparation for a year, could have far-reaching effects on metals and coal-mining companies as well as mineral exploration activities. More than 7 million acres "are in imminent danger," says NWF, of mineral development, and another 20 million acres are slated to be opened to mining soon.

NWF has asked the court to reinstate all protective designations until environmental statements and land-use plans are prepared. NWF also is seeking a preliminary injunction to freeze all actions related to these properties, including leasing, mining, land exchanges, and exploration.

"It sounds like a real corker," commented Mary Jane Due, senior counsel for the American Mining Congress, upon learning of the lawsuit. If the court sides with the environmental group, it could be years before minerals companies know whether they have access to the lands.

—MARK CRAWFORD

U.S. Meat Inspection Needs Modernization

The federal meat inspection program is outdated and has not adequately monitored for chemical or bacterial contamination, a recent report by a National Academy of Sciences committee says.*

Since the program was established in 1906, inspectors have depended on sight, smell, and touch to detect gross defects in beef, pork, and poultry. Meats that have passed through the system have been, "for the most part, wholesome," the report says.

Nevertheless, the report contends that the Federal Safety and Inspection Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), has not kept pace with technology as the methods of meat and poultry production have become complex.

The $360-million program needs to improve monitoring for several reasons, says the committee, which was chaired by Robert Wasserman of Cornell University. Meats were linked with more than half the 2600 food-borne outbreaks of gastric illness between 1968 and 1977. In 1981, salmonella contamination alone accounted for about 26 percent of all food-related illness. The committee urged that USDA adopt measures to reduce bacterial contamination of livestock before and after they are slaughtered and that an identification system for animals be established to help authorities identify which methods of farming or meat-packing produce more wholesome meat and to track down sources of tainted meat.

The report also said that USDA's program for monitoring chemical residues has several major deficiencies. The National Residue Program, which was established 15 years ago, monitors for about 100 different compounds, but, according to the report, samples far too few carcasses. This year, for example, USDA plans to test for antibiotics and sulfa drugs in only 270 cows, 300 calves, 600 turkeys, and 600 hogs. The chance that an animal will be tested is "minuscule," the report says. Moreover, information "is not organized into a form that can be analyzed."

Many of the weaknesses in the residue program and the inspection program as a whole stem from bureaucratic constraints, the report notes. USDA is charged with inspection, but the Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration set the limits on the residue levels.

The committee suggested that applications of current and evolving technologies can help to automate the old methods of inspection and provide more rapid ways to detect bacteria and chemicals. One suggestion is to use ultrasound to scan carcasses for metal particles, bone fragments, or abscesses. Monoclonal antibodies and other diagnostic products of biotechnology could be used to test for bacteria, and chromatography and spectrophotometry could be useful in detecting chemicals.

*"Meat and Poultry Inspection: The Scientific Basis of the Nation's Program" (National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., 1985).