August 8, 2001

I am writing in response to the inaccuracies and misleading statements made by Mr. Donald F. McKenzie in his guest editorial on Senator Lincoln's support for the Grand Prairie irrigation project. The project is designed to address the severe ground water depletion problems in Eastern Arkansas. This is one of the greatest resource problems currently facing the State of Arkansas and soon to be manifested in many other areas of the country that have traditionally had abundant water.

The severe ground water depletion that has occurred in Eastern Arkansas is threatening the very existence of two regional aquifers, one of which supplies the drinking water to the area. The alluvial aquifer primarily supplies water for irrigated agriculture, but because this aquifer is being depleted, agriculture is turning to the Sparta aquifer that normally supplies drinking water for the region. It is unlikely that the Sparta aquifer will recover once depleted. Irrigated agriculture is the basis of the regional economy in the Grand Prairie area. Without a source of water, farm receipts in this region will decrease by $46 million annually in the next 15 years. This problem will effect not only the landowners, but the farmers, agricultural processing plants, the agri-business, and the secondary effects of retail and tax base.

Arkansas has worked with the Corps of Engineers for many years to identify a solution to the problems in the Grand Prairie region. Many alternatives have been considered over the years and the optimum solution was found to be a combination of efficiency measures, additional water storage, environmental features and an import water system to maintain irrigated agriculture in the project area. The project would provide enough water to reduce the use of the alluvial to a sustainable amount and reserve the use of the Sparta for drinking water and industry.

The project has completed all environmental reviews needed prior to construction. National Environmental Act requirements have been met including completion and public review an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). This EIS was first released to the public in draft form along with the project report in August 1998 and a public meeting was held in Stuttgart, Arkansas, on September 15, 1998. The final report and EIS were released in December 1999. The EIS found that the project had no significant negative environmental impacts. These findings were the result of studies conducted by or with the participation of several environmental agencies including the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, and the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission. Studies included assessments of project impacts to the fisheries and wetlands along the White River. The reports are available to the public. The Environmental Protection Agency had no comments on the final EIS. The findings of the EIS were not challenged by any agency under the normal environmental review process. The project is currently under construction with over $35 million in on-farm storage and efficiency features to be under contract by the first of October.

An additional review of the water sources, in conjunction with an oversight committee appointed by the Governor of Arkansas' Task Force on Water Resources, was completed with recommendations to proceed with the project. Among those participating in the review and voting to proceed with the project were representatives from the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Nature Conservancy, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, the Arkansas State Geologist, the US Geological Survey, and the Arkansas Soil and Water Conservation Commission. Governor Huckabee has urged rapid construction of the project.

Now to address some of the inaccuracies in Mr. McKenzies's letter. First, the project boundaries were not altered in the spring of 2000 as Mr. McKenzie claims to gain the necessary project support. The statement by Mr. McKenzie is just not true. Scientific analyses conducted by recognized experts and offered for public review indicate that the project will not harm the White River. The project uses only excess water as determined by the State of Arkansas first protecting the needs of the river for fish and wildlife, water quality, and navigation. Again, scientific analyses indicate the Grand Prairie project will protect the aquifers and the economy without damaging the environment. In fact, the project will provide much additional waterfowl habitat in the Grand Prairie without decreasing the waterfowl habitat in the White River wetlands.

Mr. McKenzie has never presented his plan to the Corps or the local sponsor for the project. He never presented his ideas to the oversight committee. We have not seen any evidence that he is trying to implement his plan to save the groundwater. Prior to the release on the capitol steps of the McKenzie plan, questions were being raised about the possibility of higher irrigation efficiencies that those planned to be implemented under the project. In order to fully consider this discussion and the aquifer protection features of the project, the Corps of Engineers conducted a meeting with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the US Geological Service, the USDA's National Water Management Center, the Arkansas Soil and Water Conservation Commission, and irrigation experts cited by the USFWS as having possible information concerning the high irrigation efficiencies than planned for the project. All at the meeting agreed that efficiencies higher than currently being implemented for the Grand Prairie Area Demonstration Project were not achievable across the entire project area. Rice farmers embrace methods to save water because water is a major expense in growing rice. If there were a way to achieve 30% to 50% saving in water the rice farmers, rice researchers, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service would be among the first to embrace it. Aquifer experts agreed at the meeting that the project would provide enough water to save both the Sparta and Mississippi Valley Alluvial Aquifer.

If the Grand Prairie Area Demonstration is not constructed, both the Sparta and Mississippi Valley Alluvial Aquifer in the Grand Prairie will be depleted. The agricultural based economy will be devastated including all segments that are supported by the rich agricultural production on the prairie. The Sparta aquifer that supplies the drinking water becomes more venerable to contamination and salt-water intrusion from the salt-water aquifer below it as the pressure in the Sparta drops. The Sparta will not likely recharge because it is also venerable to consolidation as water pressure drops. The Grand Prairie Area Demonstration project has been designed in concert with the needs of the river and scientific

analyses indicate the project will not harm the river. No other plan would protect the aquifers, not harm the river, and allow for the continuation of irrigated agriculture in the Grand Prairie.

Sincerely,

James A. Bodron
Project Manager