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Memphis District

News Release

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Corps of Engineers responds to Grand Prairie Project critics

MEMPHIS, Tenn., Feb. 26, 2004 – The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Memphis District, responded today to charges in a lawsuit filed by opponents to the Grand Prairie Area Demonstration Project.

The Memphis District is confident that its environmental documentation fully complies with law and regulation. Exhaustive studies and detailed economic analyses show that the project, as proposed, protects the aquifer systems and does not harm the important natural resources of the White River and its adjacent wetlands.

The Grand Prairie project is designed to protect the Sparta Aquifer, which is primarily used for drinking water, and the Alluvial Aquifer, which interacts with the area streams and wetlands and provides for continued irrigated agriculture. A recent U.S. Geological Survey study indicates that the aquifer levels are in serious decline. The project will protect the aquifers by increasing the irrigation efficiency and storage on area farms, reducing the ground water use to a

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level that will allow the aquifer to recharge over time, and importing excess water from the White River after the needs for fish and wildlife, navigation and water quality have been met.

Studies indicated that the project will not have significant adverse environmental impacts. Furthermore, there are many positive benefits associated with project features such as those that flood cropland for waterfowl and restore approximately 3,000 acres of canal rights-of-way in native prairie grasses. Though project opponents criticize the amount of water to be withdrawn from the White River, less than two percent of the total flow of the river will be removed. Additionally, the amount of water removed will be controlled in any given month to ensure that the needs of the river for fish and wildlife, navigation and water quality are met first. The project will not harm wetlands, fisheries or waterfowl hunting on the White River.

The economic analysis for the project was conducted in close cooperation with the Natural Resources Conservation Service because of their expertise in irrigation. The analysis assumes that when the aquifer is depleted, the area could still maintain 23 percent in irrigated crops. The rest of the area would be forced to convert to dry land farming with significantly decreased economic benefits to the area.

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This assumption is based on extensive modeling by the U.S. Geological Survey and the University of Memphis' Ground Water Institute. The difference between current and future conditions reflects a loss of over $40 million annually in farm receipts from the economy. The effect of continued groundwater depletion on agribusiness, jobs, and the tax base in the region would be devastating to the area's economy.

The Grand Prairie Project, originally authorized in 1950, has been under study for more than 50 years. Work was restarted in the 1980s following a drought. Studies, including a special study led by the Arkansas Governor's Task Force on Water Resources with project opponents serving as part of an oversight committee, have all reached the same conclusion. These studies have examined numerous alternatives, including those proposed by opponents to the project. The only alternative that would protect the Sparta and Alluvial aquifers and allow for continued irrigated agriculture is a combination of efficiency and storage measures, use of ground water at its safe yield and the importation of excess surface water. The studies have concluded that the White River is the appropriate source to address the critical ground water situation in the Grand Prairie.

Lori Dabbs of the White River Irrigation District that serves, with the state of Arkansas, as local sponsors said in support of the project, "Rice production on the Grand Prairie has formed a

unique culture here since it began at the turn of the 19th century. This combination of agriculture and the ducks that winter here is being threatened.

"It's relatively simple," she continued. "No water, no rice, no ducks. We brought environmental agencies and organizations to the table very early in the planning process in order to address their concerns, minimize impacts and integrate project features that would benefit the environment. Representatives from many of these agencies now serve on an Environmental Review Team that monitors on-farm activity and will eventually monitor the distribution system. The ground water situation has become so critical that we must act now."

"Extensive studies have been performed leading to development of the project," Col. Jack V. Scherer, the Corps' Memphis District Engineer said. "We are interested to see what new facts the opponents have to back up their claims and how those facts will result in a feasible alternative."

The next event will be the release of an environmental assessment of project modifications. None of these project modifications will effect the planned pumping station on the White River. The environmental assessment process has been ongoing and was initiated prior to the suit and all changes coordinated with the project environmental team. These modifications formulated during the final design process actually improve the efficiency of the project.

Col. Scherer said, “In conjunction with the Arkansas Soil and Water Conservation Commission and the White River Irrigation District, the people who are most effected by delays, we intend to move forward because the ground water situation is so critical.”

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