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Aquifer protection project moves forward

MEMPHIS, Tenn., Sept. 10, 2004 – A solution to the critical ground water situation in the Grand Prairie will soon be underway, following a ruling by the Federal District Court for the Eastern District of Arkansas. The court ruled that environmental studies were done properly and noted that project benefits would provide waterfowl habitat, native prairie grasses and, most importantly, would protect the Sparta and Mississippi Valley Alluvial Aquifers.

Edward Lambert, project biologist who lead the studies to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act, stated, “Project studies did not reveal significant adverse impacts to wetlands, fisheries or other resources. All environmental evaluations were coordinated with key resource agencies, and we encouraged these agencies to actively participate in the performance of the studies. In fact, the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission and the Natural Resources Conservation Service led an inter-agency team effort to assess project effects on White River floodplain wetlands.”

With the court’s ruling, the Corps and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, along with the Arkansas Soil and Water Conservation Commission and the White River Regional Irrigation Water Distribution District, will continue moving forward with the project to protect the aquifers and sustain irrigated agriculture in the Grand Prairie Region.

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The project consists of increasing irrigation efficiencies and on-farm storage. Water that is surplus to the needs of the White River will be used to eliminate the demand on the Sparta Aquifer, which provides drinking water, and to reduce demand on the Alluvial Aquifer to a sustainable level. Without construction of the project, the Alluvial Aquifer and the Sparta Aquifer will be depleted and irrigated agriculture, the base of the economy on the Grand Prairie, cannot be sustained. With the ruling, construction of the efficiency and storage features will continue and a contract for the pumping station will be awarded.

David Sirmans, Memphis District Counsel stated after the ruling, “Protection of the White River is a very emotionally charged issue. We and our partners in the project, as well as project opponents, want to protect the river. The project was designed to meet the needs of the river, while addressing a critical groundwater problem. The Court reviewed the exhaustive administrative record and found the studies showing the project would not significantly impact the river were done in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act.”

Col. Charlie Smithers, District Commander for the Corps in Memphis, said, “Protection of our drinking water, water for industry, and our food production are keys to keeping our nation strong as we fight the war on terror. Protecting our environment is also a key to keeping our nation strong and our people healthy. This project balances these goals and will sustain the aquifers and irrigated agriculture without harming the river or wetlands.”