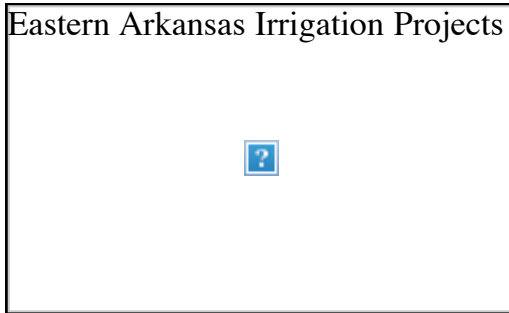


White River, Arkansas  
**Eastern Arkansas Irrigation projects**  
*Beneficiaries Favor Cheaper Alternative*



**SUMMARY**

The Grand Prairie Demonstration Project is the first of five proposed irrigation schemes, four of which would divert water from the White River system. Together, the projects would cost over \$1 billion. Many of the Grand Prairie project's intended beneficiaries, eastern Arkansas rice farmers, are unwilling to help finance its construction. Hunters, wildlife watchers, and conservationists also oppose the plan due to the diversion's impacts on critical wetlands habitat.

**THE STORY**

The Grand Prairie Demonstration Project is a \$275 million effort intended to relieve pressure on two aquifers being depleted by regional rice farms. Single-purpose irrigation projects are outside the scope and mission of the Corps. In fact, in 1991, the Corps terminated the project feasibility study due to conflicts with agency policy regarding agricultural water supply. Congress reauthorized the project in 1992.

Creation of the White River Irrigation District requires approval of a majority of the affected farmers in a referendum. To date, less than 40% of the farmers have signed-on; most are reluctant to pay \$111 million in water taxes for the local share. After spending ten years and \$20 million developing the project plan, the Corps and the Arkansas Soil and Water Conservation Commission (SWCC) refuse to consider any new alternatives.

Arkansas County farmers have formed a 300-member coalition in opposition to the project. The farmers' coalition has teamed with the Pine Bluff mill of International Paper to devise a water supply plan costing 90% less than the Corps plan. It would avoid the White River, help conserve the aquifers, and still allow irrigation of the same amount of farmland.

The Corps' project would dramatically reduce river flow, lead to major wetland loss, and increase pollutant loads through the White River National Wildlife Refuge, a Wetland of International Importance. Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt described this area as America's equivalent of the Amazon. The region is North America's most frequented wintering grounds for mallard ducks. The \$635 million spent annually in the state on hunting and recreation will decrease

significantly as the ducks' habitat is destroyed.

### **PROJECT POLITICS**

The Arkansas SWCC is attempting to command broad new powers over water distribution in the state. When the Commission recognized that many farmers did not support the project, the agency kept the project alive by making a commitment to pay the local cost-share. It subsequently admitted that it did not intend to pay, but instead hoped that the local White River Irrigation District would foot the bill, pending farmer approval of the project. At the urging of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Environmental Protection Agency, the President's FY 2001 budget proposes a White River Basin Comprehensive Study.

### **NATIONAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Restrict Corps projects to those within its stated missions. Irrigation is not a Corps mission.
- Do not promote projects that result in wetland destruction.

### **MORE INFORMATION**

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**Helpful Websites:** [www.nwf.org](http://www.nwf.org)