

# Looking toward the future: Three Bend Scenic and Wildlife Refuge Area

In July 1999 DOE Secretary Bill Richardson surprised all of Oak Ridge with the news that 3,000 acres of local federal land would henceforth be committed to conservation and wildlife management as the Three Bend Scenic and Wildlife Refuge Area. The "Three Bends" are Solway, Freels and Gallaher Bends, with 20 miles of shoreline on the Clinch River (Melton Hill Reservoir), a natural treasure in the midst of increasing urbanization.

The land remains in federal government ownership, but DOE has partnered with the Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency (TWRA) to manage the land for wildlife.

In the six years since the DOE announcement, there has been

much progress toward making the Three Bends a more valuable conservation, education and outdoor recreation asset for Oak Ridge and Tennessee. However, a variety of misconceptions exist in the community about the Three Bend area. With the current 5-year agreement under which the TWRA has

been managing the area coming up for renewal early next year, the time seems ripe to revisit the story of this area.

The Three Bends contain a diverse mixture of field, woodland and shoreline. Wildlife ecologists say this rare mixture makes wonderful habitat for songbirds, waterfowl and upland game such as deer, turkey and small game birds. As a result, this area has great poten-

tial for outdoor recreation activities such as hunting and birdwatching.

Many of us have been waiting impatiently for our chance to play on these lands. Unfortunately, general public use is restricted in order to control access to the city water supply intake on Solway Bend and because the government agencies have concerns about the hazards of old barns and other buildings on the land. However, all three bends are open for deer and turkey hunting during the controlled hunts on the Oak Ridge Reservation.

Guided public walks happen periodically on Freels and Solway Bends, and the public can walk or bicycle on the Gallaher Bend Greenway almost any time (except during hunts).

This land will never be a public park similar to the Clark

Center Recreation Area (which is not part of the Three Bend Area), but under long-term TWRA management we can expect public recreation opportunities to increase.

Since 2001 TWRA has been conducting long-term projects to make the excellent wildlife habitat on the Three Bends even better. TWRA has sprayed non-native fescue grass on Freels and Solway Bends with herbicide, bush-hogged parts of the area and conducted prescribed burns to control undesirable vegetation, and reseeded some of the land with native grasses and crops. Areas around barns, structures and roads have been cleared for safety and conservation purposes.

Meanwhile, University of Tennessee biology and wildlife classes have been coming to Three Bends for class field trips, and UT students and fac-

ulty are using the area for wildlife and ecological research activities. UT faculty appreciate being able to bring their students to a diverse and high-quality habitat area located so close to the campus.

ORNL also continues to use the area for education. In particular, ORNL conducts K-12 educational activities, including popular summer science camps, at the historic Freels cabin.

What's next for the Three Bends? Effective conservation management requires a long-term commitment, and DOE clearly intended for the Three Bend area to be committed to conservation forever.

In response to a question at the announcement ceremony, former Secretary Richardson said: "It's permanent. This is for the people of Oak Ridge, for the kids. It's a wildlife preserve."

Richardson made similar an-

nouncements at other DOE sites where lands were transferred to other federal agencies for management under permanent legal arrangements.

Here in Oak Ridge, DOE decided that the best agency to manage the area was not another federal agency but a Tennessee state agency. Therefore, DOE made a different sort of legal arrangement here than at the other sites, but this technicality should not diminish the agency's commitment.

Ideally, the current agreement with TWRA would be extended by converting it into a permanent conservation management agreement, but renewal of the current agreement should assure continued progress toward enhancing the Three Bend Area a natural treasure for future generations to enjoy and cherish.

Ellen Smith, for Advocates for the Oak Ridge Reservation (AFORR)



Ellen Smith  
Guest column