

Tennessee Ornithological Society

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April 24, 2000

William Richardson
Secretary
U.S. Department of Energy
1000 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, D. C. 20585

Dear Secretary Richardson:

As President of the Tennessee Ornithological Society (TOS), I am writing in response to a recent DOE press release in which you called for a review of the property needs of DOE facilities. The primary purpose of this review, you stated, was to make long-term recommendations concerning the agency's real estate needs in relation to its mission requirements. On behalf of the statewide membership of the TOS, I urge the agency to consider the unique conservation values of the DOE Oak Ridge Reservation lands. In particular, I urge you to consider their extraordinary value as a breeding ground for neotropical migratory songbirds.

Because of its unique history of protection from human encroachment, the 35,000 acres owned by the U. S. Department of Energy in east Tennessee is the largest publicly owned and relatively unfragmented tract of forested land in the Ridge and Valley Province of Tennessee. This block of land is a large and nearly continuous island of forest within a landscape that is fragmented by urban development and agriculture. It is well-known that increases in fragmentation of natural ecosystems lead to reduced breeding success among a number of our declining bird species. Many of these bird species are so successful on the Oak Ridge Reservation because they are sensitive to human disturbance and need large tracts of interior forest habitats to protect them from predators and parasitic bird species.

Breeding bird surveys of this reservation conducted by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency and members of the TOS since 1995 have clearly established that 18 of the 20 species listed for the Southern Ridge and Valley Province by the Partners in Flight program as "Birds of very high concern, vulnerable, and likely in need of management and/or monitoring" breed in this area. Eight of these 16 species require large tracts of unfragmented mid- to late-successional forest habitat for successful breeding. The DOE reservation in Oak Ridge is one of the few such large tracts remaining in the Ridge and Valley of Tennessee or Virginia.

In addition, eight of the species high on the list of "Birds of Concern" by Partners in Flight use the reservation extensively for breeding and thus are among the most common breeding birds there. One species near the top on PIF's list of concern, the Wood Thrush, is the third most common bird species present on the reservation during the breeding season. Also, many species considered by other sources to be "threatened or in need of management" have also been observed on the Oak Ridge Reservation, including Bald Eagle (currently federally-listed as "threatened"), Peregrine Falcon, Osprey, Cooper's Hawk, Northern Harrier, Anhinga, Olive-sided Flycatcher, and Grasshopper Sparrow.

While much of the Oak Ridge Reservation consists on large tracts of mature forests, the reservation is also valuable because its land cover is a mosaic of vegetation types and habitats, largely protected from human disturbance. For example, many of the pine forests that have been killed by beetles now have become early successional "shrub-scrub" habitat. Such habitat is becoming increasingly rare in this part of the country, leading to the decline of a number of migrant species that require it. Three such PIF species of concern—Prairie Warbler, Field Sparrow, and Yellow-breasted Chat—however, are among the 20 most common species breeding on the reservation. Other important habitat types include cove forests, riparian forests, mature pine stands, small stream bottoms, and wetland areas. The Tennessee chapter of The Nature Conservancy has identified no less than 270 significant species (plant and animal) and communities on the reservation.

The members of TOS were naturally delighted to hear your declaration of the Three Bend Scenic and Wildlife Management Refuge. The area surrounding this parcel of land contains several nesting platforms actively used by Osprey, a Great Blue Heron rookery, and beautiful unique tracts of land, such as Freel's Bend. Still we must note that this refuge constitutes less than one-tenth (about 3,000 acres) of this reservation. In recent years, a sizeable amount of the Oak Ridge Reservation has been made available by DOE for local economic development. Of the remaining 35,000 acres on the Reservation, only about 20,000 now remain in the Oak Ridge National Environmental Research Park. In recent years, approximately 5,000 acres have been made available for development, as the Oak Ridge Reservation continues to shrink in size.

Because the Oak Ridge Reservation is basically a very extensive "island in a sea of development and population expansion," we believe its value as an open green space and a recreational area will continue to grow. Its uniqueness will become increasingly recognized by hikers, hunters, fisherman, birders, cyclists, and the population as a whole, as areas such as this continue to disappear with population growth.

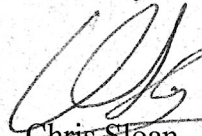
The Tennessee Ornithological Society hereby exhorts the U. S. Department of Energy to protect the DOE Oak Ridge Reservation land from further fragmentation, deforestation, and development, and to preserve as much as possible of this area in large contiguous tracts of forest. We also urge you to join with the many other federal agencies in such national conservation efforts as Partners in Flight. This program boasts active participation from almost all federal agencies with significant land holdings except the

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DOE. It also includes many state agencies, private organizations, and partners in Latin America. Future generations need your leadership to protect the remaining reservation lands from short-sighted developments that benefit only local developers rather than our nation as a whole.

I would be more than happy to discuss this matter with you further should you feel the need. I may be reached at home by phone at (615) 353-0811 or by email at chris.sloan@home.com, or you may reach me at work by phone at (615) 252-2392 or by email at csloan@bccb.com.

Sincerely,



Chris Sloan

President

Tennessee Ornithological Society

cc: President William J. Clinton
Vice-President Albert Gore
DOE Oak Ridge Operations Manager Leah Dever
DOE Deputy Secretary Glauthier
Congressional delegation of the State of Tennessee