

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR**news release**

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ANDRUS URGES SENATE COMMITTEE TO ADOPT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
92 MILLION ACRES OF NEW PARKS AND REFUGES IN ALASKA

Secretary of the Interior Cecil D. Andrus today urged the Senate Energy Committee to adopt President Carter's recommendation to designate 92 million acres of federal lands in Alaska as new or expanded units of the National Park, Wildlife Refuge, Wild and Scenic River or National Forest systems.

"Through enactment of these proposals, we can be certain that the crown jewels of Alaska -- its most spectacular natural environments, recreation areas and wildlife habitats -- will remain intact for the benefit of our nation's citizens," Andrus said.

"It is only in Alaska -- out of all our great nation -- where we can still see land much as the first migrants across the Bering Sea from Asia must have seen it tens of thousands of years ago," Andrus told the committee.

The recommendations would add about 45 million acres to the National Park system in 13 units and about 42 million acres to the Wildlife Refuge system in 13 units. In addition about 3 million acres will be added to the Tongass and Chugach national forests in Southeast and Southcentral Alaska, and 33 rivers with a total area of about 2.3 million acres will be added to the Wild and Scenic River System.

The House Interior Subcommittee on General Oversight and Alaska Lands began marking up similar legislation this week.

The recommendations offered by Andrus today stem from Section 17(d)(2) of the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act which directed the Secretary of the Interior to nominate land in Alaska for inclusion in the four conservation systems. The act set a deadline of the end of 1978 for Congressional action on the Secretary's recommendations.

In his testimony, Andrus noted that there were "hard decisions," over the classification of certain areas. But, he said, the decisions "reflect my best judgment."

He also said they reflect "the Interior Department's, and this Administration's commitment to protect Alaskan wildlands while remaining sensitive to Alaska's and the Nation's need to own and develop resources."

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Among the most difficult, he said, was the decision to designate existing portions of the Arctic National Wildlife Range as wilderness. There is interest in oil and gas exploration in this area, but it is also home to the Porcupine Caribou Herd. This is one of the world's largest remaining herds of free roaming animals, with about 120,000 members. With additions, the Arctic Refuge would be the country's only essentially untouched piece of total arctic ecosystem, stretching from the shores of the Arctic Ocean-Beaufort Sea to Alaska's interior south of the Brooks Range.

Andrus also called for wilderness designation for Admiralty Island, a 1 million acre island in Southeast Alaska with the nation's largest remaining uncut forest. It is home for some of the nation's largest populations of Brown Bears and Bald Eagles. It is also the site of the traditional Tlingit Indian Village of Angoon. Wilderness designation would protect both the cultural and natural resources of the island, Andrus said.

Andrus called the creation of Alaskan parks, refuges, wild rivers and forests "a task of historic significance."

"The President and I are totally committed to early passage of a strong legislative package," Andrus said.

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