

**Assessment of the Cache-White River Issues
Ducks Unlimited, Inc.
March 2004**

Background: Cache-Lower White River Ecosystem

The Cache–Lower White River system is a unique ecological treasure. Historically, it has been the most important wintering area for mid-continent mallards, and is renowned for its fish and wildlife productivity. The ecosystem contains three national wildlife refuges and four state wildlife management areas totaling approximately one-quarter million acres. A significant recreational economy has prospered because of the abundant fish and wildlife resources. At the heart of the river system is one of the largest contiguous blocks of forested wetland habitat existing in North America, and by far the largest remaining tract on any tributary in the entire Mississippi River basin. Because of its ecological significance, the Cache-Lower White River system was designated as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention in 1989.

All of the fish and wildlife-based values of this ecosystem are dependent upon functional hydrology. The hydrology of this system is the most natural of any large river in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley. However, alterations have occurred. For example, numerous upstream dams, deforestation in parts of the watershed, and hydrologic modifications of its tributaries, all have altered the natural hydrology of the White River. Despite those challenges, the White River remains a national and international treasure due to the remaining integrity of the hydrology of the river, which is related to the minimal alterations of its lower reaches.

Grand Prairie Area Demonstration Irrigation Project (GPADP)

The GPADP is a complex irrigation demonstration project being constructed in eastern Arkansas. The goal of the project is to halt the rapid depletion of groundwater (Alluvial Aquifer) caused by withdrawals for irrigation and municipal purposes. The GPADP calls for groundwater for irrigation to be supplemented by diversion of surface water from the White River. This diversion would occur by pumping water from the river through a series of canals and natural channels to on-farm irrigation reservoirs and tail-water recovery troughs for irrigation purposes.

DU, along with numerous partners, is actively working to conserve, restore and enhance wetlands and other habitats on private lands in eastern Arkansas. Natural and restored wetlands serve many vital functions, including 1) reducing demands for groundwater, 2) recharging aquifers, and 3) providing critical foraging and resting areas for migrating and wintering waterfowl and shorebirds.

Considerable disagreement and uncertainty remain within the agricultural community, among landowners, and conservation groups, regarding the GPADP. DU is committed to work with all interests to achieve sustainable, long-term use of

water resources in the Grand Prairie project area and elsewhere in Arkansas. Alienating any interests at this time would be counterproductive to finding long-term solutions for balancing the growing water issues of the region.

As of the date of this document, Ducks Unlimited has neither actively supported nor opposed the GPADP for the following reasons:

- **DU is deeply concerned about the cumulative impacts of all projects, including those proposed, planned and existing that collectively have and will continue to alter the White River ecosystem. This forested wetland, in conjunction with the adjacent complex of flooded rice field habitats, comprises critical wintering grounds for several million migratory waterfowl annually. While wildlife concerns and impacts related solely to the GPADP were addressed in the Environmental Impact Statement, DU shares concerns with other conservation organizations that the collective impacts of all projects affecting the White River have not been adequately evaluated. Cumulative impacts of all projects must be evaluated to prevent undesired results that are detrimental to the sustainability of this system. Such undesired results ultimately would affect all that have recreational, agricultural, or commercial interests in the resources of the White River.**
- **Ducks Unlimited supports efforts to conserve all existing water resources in Arkansas. Proposals to increase use of water from the White and other rivers in Arkansas for irrigation purposes must be closely monitored and evaluated in conjunction with all other alternatives. Meeting growing irrigation demands through expanded use of surface water should only be one of several possible alternatives, and no individual alternative should be expected to apply in all regions of Arkansas.**
- **DU recognizes that the continued depletion of the Alluvial Aquifer is a serious issue to sustainable agriculture and strategies to avert the water decline must be implemented. Waterfowl that use this region depend on thousands of acres of rice and other agricultural crops that provide important winter habitat. Thus, DU is concerned with the rapid decline in the aquifer and the potential significant negative effects that could impact the waterfowl resource.**

White River Navigation Improvement Project

Ducks Unlimited is opposed to the White River Navigation Improvement Project. DU adopted this position in 1999 because the Project unquestionably conflicts with our mission of waterfowl and wetland habitat conservation. Reasons for this decision include:

- **In our opinion, the WRNIP as currently crafted will adversely and irreversibly impact waterfowl and other fish and wildlife habitat, wetland**

values and functions, and the unique natural history of one of the few remaining functional forested wetland systems in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley.

- **The WRNIP is clearly inconsistent with fish and wildlife values and offers no apparent positive environmental elements.**
- **The project proposes a 9-foot deep by 200-foot wide navigation channel for 254 miles on the lower White River. Much of the dredging would occur adjacent to and within the White River National Wildlife Refuge and part of the Cache River NWR, both of which are critical habitat for millions of migrating and wintering waterfowl.**

DU has been keenly aware of, and involved in, numerous White River issues for many years. In fact, in 1999, DU convened a meeting of several conservation groups to raise awareness of the threats to the Cache and White Rivers. In 2002, DU, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, and others, endorsed the White River Comprehensive Study. This effort sought to assess water resource-related ecological limits and opportunities within the river basin. Knowledge of these relationships is vital to understanding cumulative impacts of all White River projects, particularly the effects on wildlife and fish habitat and populations. Results from this study are vital for interested organizations to objectively assess potential impacts of proposed water resource projects.

DU is concerned about the future of the Cache-White River ecosystem and long-term availability of waterfowl habitat in the region. We remain committed to working with landowners, the Arkansas Congressional delegation, and all other stakeholders to seek strategies for sustainable uses that will address the long-term concerns. We seek balance between an economically viable rice industry and sustainable conservation benefits. The millions of ducks that winter here annually, and the duck hunters that cherish this river, depend on this balance!

For more information, please contact:

**Craig Hilburn
Director of Conservation Programs – Arkansas
(501) 955-9264
chilburn@ducks.org**