INTERIOR REOPENS COMMENT PERIODS ON ACREAGE LIMITATION ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT AND PROPOSED RULES

The public is again being asked for comments on the Interior Department's proposed rules and regulations for acreage limitation of western farms served by Bureau of Reclamation project water and on the draft environmental impact statement (DEIS), which accompanied the proposals issued January 14, 1981.

The period for public comment, which originally had been set to close on March 16, 1981, was suspended on February 19 to allow Interior's new leadership adequate time to study and thoroughly review the acreage limitation issue. The new closing date for the comment periods is December 31, 1981.

"We are resuming the comment periods on the proposed rules and the draft environmental impact statement to comply with two United States district court orders that were issued in 1976 and 1977 and remain in effect," Secretary of the Interior James Watt said.

The first court order directed the publication of rules and regulations dealing with acreage limitation, and the second halted the rulemaking action until an environmental impact statement on the proposed rules could be completed.

"The proposed rules that were published on January 14 by the previous Administration should not be considered as final rules," Watt emphasized.

"We are anxious to have full public input in the rulemaking effort in order to assure that the final rules that may be issued will have a minimum impact on the well established agricultural economies on western reclamation projects consistent with the requirements of law," Watt stated.

"The 6-month comment period we have provided should allow ample time for all interested persons and organizations to submit comments on this issue," he added.

Public hearings on the proposed rules and the draft environmental impact statement may be scheduled during the comment period. The dates and places of any public hearings will be published in the Federal Register when they have been determined.

While the original comment period was in effect from January 14 to February 19, 1981, a number of comments on the proposed rules and DEIS were submitted. These comments have been retained and will be considered in preparing the final environmental impact statement and rules. Comments received after February 19 were returned and must be resubmitted in order to be considered.

"We are continuing to assist members of the Congress in their efforts to develop proposed legislation that would modernize Reclamation law dealing with acreage limitation. We hope to have a proposal available in the near future for consideration by Congress," Watt said. "If the law is changed, we will prepare and publish rules based on the new law," he added.