

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DECEMBER 4, 1974

OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESS CONFERENCE

OF

ROGERS C. B. MORTON, SECRETARY,
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR;
JOHN R. McGUIRE, CHIEF, FOREST SERVICE,
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE;

AND

E. U. CURTIS BOHLEN, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY,
FISH AND WILDLIFE AND PARKS
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

THE BRIEFING ROOM

2:15 P.M. EST.

MR. NESSEN: As we promised you this morning, Secretary Morton is going to brief you this afternoon. He and Secretary Butz have met with the President for about twenty minutes to discuss legislation that the President is sending to Congress today proposing 37 additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System be made.

I believe you have the printed material on this, including a letter from the President and a fact sheet.

I have the feeling that some of you may want to ask Secretary Morton questions in other areas, and Secretary Morton is willing to do that. I do suggest that maybe the thing to do would be to ask him all your questions on the wilderness area first, and when that is cleared up, go ahead on the other things that may interest you.

This will be for filming and taping.

Secretary Morton.

SECRETARY MORTON: Thank you, Ron.

Hopefully all of you have the statement that we have prepared for you. I don't think it really should be read. It is very self-explanatory.

I would just recap the statement by saying that in this group of wilderness proposals that are being sent today to the Congress by the President, we fairly well complete our mission under the 1964 act for study and submission of proposals.

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The proposals today include 37 new wilderness areas at a little over nine million acres, and I think you will find in your fact sheet which has been distributed a typographical error. I believe it says "91 million" in the middle of the fact sheet and it should be 9.1 million.

These wilderness proposals break out as follows: There are seven of them in the parks, 22 in our wild life refuges and eight in the forest. We deferred five areas and we found four areas in the study group that we felt did not have the wilderness characteristics and therefore came out negative as far as the proposal was concerned.

I am doing what I did last year. The format is generally the same and we now have, I think, something in the order of 160, or nearly 170 proposals before the Congress.

The Congress has only acted on 30 of these. But remember that these areas are administered as wilderness as soon as these proposals are made, though they have not been officially designated so by the Congress.

I will be glad to try to answer your questions.

Q Mr. Secretary, can you say how many acres of the new wilderness areas would be potentially available for timber harvesting?

SECRETARY MORTON: None.

Q Would be potentially?

SECRETARY MORTON: I beg your pardon. I will have to ask Mr. John McGuire, who is the head of the National Forest Service, who I am sure can answer that question better than I can.

I would hasten to add that timbering is not done in the parks or refuge areas.

John.

MR. MCGUIRE: In each of these areas there is some area that could be classified as commercial forest land potentially. I have the figures area by area, but I haven't the total. I would expect that something less than half of the total acreage proposed in the national forest would so qualify.

Q Mr. Secretary, on the denial of the Upper Mississippi Wildlife Refuge, is that because of the Corps of Engineers' opposition so that they can continue dumping dredge spoils there?

SECRETARY MORTON: Let me ask Curtis Bohlen, Deputy Assistant Secretary, to answer that.

MR. BOHLEN: The answer is no to your question. We are working very closely with the Corps and for the moment we have asked that this whole question be deferred until we have an opportunity for the Corps working with us to reach an agreement on where the spoil from the dredging of the channel could be placed.

And we, if you notice in here, have specified that the President will ask for a new study within three years. By that time we hope to have the dredging study finished and be able to have a positive recommendation for the wilderness in Mississippi.

Q Mr. Secretary, is there any reason to think that the areas being held back for survey are mineral rich or just a case of other areas are surveyed and these aren't?

SECRETARY MORTON: We haven't been able to get around to it because we haven't had the resources to survey them all. As you know, we take a hard look at them; Geological Survey does.

There is a time factor. It takes a bit of manpower to do this. I wish we could do it overnight, but that is the reason, because of the time it takes.

Q Mr. Secretary, does the holding back of recommendations on these large game ranges in the southwest where you have pending mineral studies prejudice the case?

SECRETARY MORTON: I don't think it does. I think, as you know, we have a pastoral situation there, and their land is already under multiple use and it is going to take a good deal more study, I think, to conclude. I don't think any area is prejudiced.

Q It could be part wilderness.

SECRETARY MORTON: Yes, that is right. You know my attitude about this going back to the 1964 bill, and I would hope we would get at this in due time. I think in doing this if you do it properly and you do it carefully and you don't try to overrun everybody roughshod, I find you get the job done and you are familiar with the problems down there, and I think we will come along in due time and nothing is prejudiced.

We have no preconceived ideas. We are moving forward. I think one thing that would help us is if the Congress would get into this. I know they have been busy and the areas are protected and they may feel that because they are protected there is no urgency.

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But I believe for the general public good and for the wilderness concept it would be very wise if the Congress would get into this business and really tackle the job and go ahead with the program.

Q Mr. Secretary, may I ask you a related question in relation to your duties as energy adviser?

SECRETARY MORTON: Sure.

Q Last year one of the major problems the country had, as I understand it, was inadequate reporting of the amount of oil coming into the country, the amount of oil being used, so it was very difficult to say exactly where we stood.

We have been waiting here for a report on the rate of consumption this year, and Mr. Nessen indicated today that the figures still may not be precise enough to really say where we stand.

SECRETARY MORTON: One of the problems, of course, is that any cut-off of statistics, for example, for this week versus the same week last year, has got to be seasonally adjusted for temperature and change.

The Federal Energy Administration is really getting a handle on that, and I think by the close of this year we will be able to give to the public well adjusted on a seasonal basis and yet very accurate actual statistics on importation consumption of various components, such as gasoline, heating oil and the like.

Q From the figures you have now, can you tell us how well the voluntary conservation measures are working?

SECRETARY MORTON: On gasoline, we are about 3 percent this year in terms of actual reduction; in other words, we have not only wiped out the growth which was anticipated to be about 2 or 3 percent, but we have actually reduced the consumption of gasoline by about 3 percent. This would relate to something in the order of 3 percent and 17-1/2 million barrels a day.

Q Mr. Secretary, given this 3 percent figure, and given the President's recent statements, have you lost any enthusiasm you had for gasoline tax? Is that a dead issue as far as you are concerned now?

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SECRETARY MORTON: My enthusiasm was never there. I just threw it out as one of the alternatives. It is an alternative. It is a way of raising the price.

We know that raising the price tends to lower consumption, as raising the price of the crude product tends to increase supply. One of the difficulties of the gasoline tax as a way to go, of course, is the equitable redistribution of the tax itself so that you are not penalizing the economy, and I think it is going to be very difficult.

It sounds easy, but it is going to be very difficult to actually do that. But we are looking today at all of the various ways to go. We are looking at the tax. We are looking at the question of rationing. We are looking at the question of import controls and before the end of this month, the President will have these options before him.

We will discuss it with him at great length, and he will be in such a position as he can make policy decisions that will be articulated both in the message on the State of the Union as well as succeeding early on messages that deal specifically with that.

Q Mr. Secretary, in your discussions with the President on that issue, have you gotten the impression that as he said in Sioux City, there will never be an increase in the gas tax in his Administration or is that an option he would still consider given the state of the country?

SECRETARY MORTON: I think the President is a very open-minded person as far as he is going to do what is in the best interest of the country. I can share with him the apprehension of a tax which has certainly no popularity in the country.

But I just feel sure that the President is going to examine every option and is not going to be close-minded about any particular way to go. I think what he is doing, and very rightly so, is he is saying now, "There are many options, and I want to see the staff work done very well," and everyone of these options has got to be adequately explored and he has put us to work, very rightly.

Q Is it fair to say he is resisting but still considering?

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SECRETARY MORTON: I don't know that he is at this point considering it. I think what he is getting us to do is present him the material so he can make a considered judgment and can consider. He has the problem in our lap, in the lap of the Administration, and we are going to try to give him every avenue and finally a recommendation as to which way to go.

I think he can very well speak for himself and has. He has said this is an unpopular proposition and wants to see other ways to go. He is not inclined in that direction, and we are going to give him every opportunity to make a judgment based on the best information we have.

Q Today would you personally recommend it to him?

SECRETARY MORTON: No, I would not today. I want to see all the options, too.

Q Mr. Secretary, it is my understanding within your domain is the Park Police, and I have called repeatedly and tried to get some explanation as to why, when a limousine went at high speed with its lights out at night near the Tidal Basin, no citation was issued.

They will give no comment, and I would like very much if you could give us some explanation as to why no citation was given to the driver of that Lincoln Continental and how they can give citations to anybody if they don't give it to him.

SECRETARY MORTON: Let me assure you one thing, Father. I was not there. (Laughter)

Q I think you are to be commended. (Laughter)

SECRETARY MORTON: I can't answer that. The Park Police in my judgment do a great job. They try to help people. They try to correct the wrongs. They try to enforce the law and have a safer and better community. For me to bore in and be able to tell you why a ticket was or was not issued in a specific case, I don't have the information.

Q Would you be willing to ask them?

SECRETARY MORTON: I would be willing to ask them why they won't but I am not necessarily sure that I would be willing to try and interpret their policy. Secretary Reed is here, who with the Assistant Secretary under whom the Park Service reports, but let me just say this:

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I have great admiration for the Park Police. They do a fine and splendid job, not only here but other places where they are employed. I think if you will look at their record, and I think you have to look at that rather than one speeding ticket or one --

Q This was a case where there was a whole carload of drunks going at high speed with the lights out.

SECRETARY MORTON: This was a case that involved the Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee of the House of Representatives, which puts this whole thing in a different ballpark.

Q Does it?

SECRETARY MORTON: Yes, it does. I am sure that there are people speeding all over this Nation that have had problems who have either gotten tickets or not gotten tickets. I know I have seen them issue tickets time and time again for violations, but I am sure they have issued warnings time and time for violations, and I don't think the enforcement of traffic laws is so finite that you can put it in a very well-defined category.

I think it is a difficult thing. They probably should have done it. I don't know that under the confusion that they were under, under the circumstances with a person jumping into the Tidal Basin, that the policeman reached for his ticket book. (Laughter)

He probably didn't, and he is a human being just like everybody else, and I am sure that a Park Policeman in the middle of the night with a darkened limousine with several people scratching each other and one turns out to be the Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee was undoubtedly startled and this was an unconventional event.

Q Does the Park Police have a set policy not to ticket Members of Congress?

SECRETARY MORTON: No, they do not have a set policy not to ticket Members of Congress. I can speak as an ex-Member of Congress. (Laughter)

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Q What effect does the present Canadian policy on exporting oil to the United States have on our energy policy?

SECRETARY MORTON: Over time, as they develop their pipeline, this will probably give us some supply problems that we will have to make up from other areas. The Canadians have decided to use their own oil in all of their markets. They have been, as you know, shipping us oil to the tune of about a million barrels a day, and that oil is being replaced in Canada by imported oil.

They are trying to construct a system and are constructing a system which will give them the opportunity to be more independent themselves and we will have to find a replacement for that oil.

Q Mr. Secretary, right now where do you see that replacement coming from?

SECRETARY MORTON: I think it will come hopefully, a good piece, from conservation, and that is, I think, our best short-term hope. As you know, we have a very large program for the expansion of domestic reserves by the development of these reserves on the public lands, both wet and dry.

I think we will have to look also to other energy sources to replace some of that oil, such as coal.

Q Mr. Secretary, I understand you had another assessment today on the natural gas situation in this country. What is that? Is the price deepening?

SECRETARY MORTON: It is not deepening over what we assessed it at. We assessed it as being a ten percent shortfall, and I think we will have a ten percent shortfall in curtailment this year.

Q What does this mean?

SECRETARY MORTON: This could mean, if the winter is excessively cold, this could have an impact on jobs. It would have an impact on industry; it will have quite an impact on the interruptible contractors for natural gas.

Q Have you projected it on the number it could mean?

SECRETARY MORTON: It is difficult to do because the figure is not that precise because it is so affected by weather, but for example, it could amount to substantial layoffs.--I don't have the figures at the tip of my tongue -- in areas like southern New Jersey, for example, and there are some other areas, such as North Carolina where we could have some layoffs. Just what the total of those layoffs could potentially be, I am not sure.

Q What is the answer to this?

SECRETARY MORTON: The answer to this is deregulation of natural gas in the long run, and the answer in the short run is conservation, and the answer also in the short run is to substitute this natural gas with other fuels. But the problem here, of course, is that natural gas is priced at such a way that substituting with other fuels is a very expensive proposition, because both coal and oil are priced considerably higher than natural gas because of the regulated feature of natural gas.

Q Mr. Secretary, did you and Mr. Butz spend any of your time in conservation just now referring to the visit by Mr. Trudeau? Did that subject come up?

SECRETARY MORTON: No, it did not.

Q Mr. Secretary, you said that the Canadian policy on exports or imports into this country may force some conservation --

SECRETARY MORTON: No, not force it. I think conservation is a solution to it. I hope that people are responding to the need for conservation without action-forcing events.

Q I think some of that oil has gone into refineries in the Midwest. Do you foresee a shortage of gasoline or heating oil in those areas?

SECRETARY MORTON: No, I do not. The reason is we have an entitlement program going into effect which will give those independent refiners in the Midwest an opportunity to put in oil though it comes from other sources, at an equitable price.

I don't think that is going to take place fast enough. Remember the Canadian reduction is a gradual phase-out and therefore we don't see any shortage at this point in time. It is a matter of adjusting the price of the input into the refineries and we have an equalization program which attempts to make it equal for everybody.

Q On that same subject, overall then do I understand that even with the possibility of an extra cold winter you don't see the prospect of rationing oil for household use?

SECRETARY MORTON: No, there will have to be an allocation, I think, for interruptible supplies because of the priority of the householder. You are talking about natural gas?

Q Yes.

SECRETARY MORTON: I do not see the curtailment going to the point where the individual store owner, the home owner, is affected. It is going to affect the larger users, the commercial and industrial users first because they are on a different priority basis.

Q Heating oil?

SECRETARY MORTON: No, I don't see any shortage in heating oil this winter. I thought we were talking about natural gas.

Q Both.

SECRETARY MORTON: Heating oil we should have good stock and get through the winter in good shape. It will be expensive, and this is our problem. The crisis is a crisis of price.

Q In the Dinosaur National Monument in Utah and Colorado, aren't those already wilderness areas?

SECRETARY MORTON: No, they were not. The areas specified in those areas are new designations.

Q One other question: Have you looked into the siphoning off of the gas pipelines?

SECRETARY MORTON: I am sorry, I don't understand.

Q There was a story a couple of years ago about the siphoning off of the pipeline outlet in the mountain areas.

SECRETARY MORTON: You mean somebody coming in and cheating a little bit?

Q Right.

SECRETARY MORTON: I think we are trying to protect the property. I don't see much of it. I haven't heard of anybody -- you mean illegally stealing gas out of the pipeline?

Q Yes, or whatever they do.

SECRETARY MORTON: There are some perfectly legal distributions from the main pipeline made during the time that the right-of-ways were required, and those are legal, just like any other user. I haven't heard of anybody stealing from the pipeline. Obviously this would be a local policy issue.

THE PRESS: Thank you, gentlemen.

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(AT 2:35 P.M. EST)