

Mason Neck Addition

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■ A proposal to incorporate a surplus Army post into the Mason Neck Wildlife Refuge got the approval of Congress this month, making it likely that bird-watchers and hikers will soon tread on land once used for secret testing associated with nuclear weapons.

Transfer of the 580-acre Woodbridge Research Facility, formerly known as the Harry Diamond Laboratories, in Eastern Prince William County was included in a military appropriations bill that now will go to President Clinton, who is expected to sign it.

The bill calls for the Army to turn over the land, which borders the Potomac River, to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Sept. 30.

Over the years, the site had a variety of Defense Department roles. Once it was a secret radio listening post; later it was an electronic testing ground, where certain effects of nuclear blasts were simulated. The tests did not involve explosions or radioactivity and did not harm the environment, according to Army officials.

The land is on a peninsula at the confluence of the Potomac and Occoquan rivers, less than 15 minutes south of the Capital Beltway, and it harbors 200 animal species and 300 kinds of plants. It is one of the most lush habitats and bird marshes in the Washington area, said Dennis Shiflett, spokesman for the Virginia Wildlife Federation.

J. Frederick Milton, manager of the Mason Neck refuge, said the land will be added to the 2,200 acres the Fish and Wildlife Service already manages on the Fairfax County side of the Occoquan.

It would be opened to the public before the end of the year, allowing dawn-to-dusk access for boating, fishing, hiking and other recreation, he said.

Sens. Charles S. Robb (D-Va.) and John W. Warner (R-Va.) led the legislative move, ending a struggle that began in 1991 when the post was slated for closing. Last year, Congress killed an attempt by the Library of Congress to use the land for warehousing books and records.

This spring, Prince William County tried to save some of the land for development, and a consultant's study foresaw creation of 1,000 jobs and more than \$500,000 in annual tax revenue if development were permitted.

The legislation provides for keeping the land in its natural state, although it allows for environmental education programs that would create some jobs.

— Spencer S. Hsu

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