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Uncle Sam Goes Grubbing for Land

THE FEDERAL "Park Barrel" has come to Oklahoma and it is finding opposition from people whose lands would be expropriated.

"Park Barrel" is a term applied to the largest park bill ever passed by Congress, but it fits other recreational projects, too.

Just before adjournment, Congress authorized \$1.2 billion for acquiring hundreds of thousands of acres for more than 100 parks and preservation projects in 44 states, not including Oklahoma.

Then last week, under an older law, President Carter transformed 56 million acres in Alaska into national parks, wildlife refuges and wilderness areas. Uncle Sam is becoming a land grabber.

Included in other lands about to pass from private ownership into control by federal bureaus is a ready-made plan for a 40-mile-long strip adjacent to Deep Fork river in central Oklahoma.

The Deep Fork project would take 35,000 to 40,000 acres of land out of production, remove it from tax rolls and replace private ownership with

management from Washington.

It is estimated that more than 500,000 pecan trees would be lost to commercial production, along with useful crop and pasture land.

It would seem the government already has enough land. The Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management administers an area four times as large as Oklahoma. Other agencies also own large areas. BLM's tracts include more than one-fifth of the nation's commercial forests. The government owns 48 percent of 11 Rocky Mountain and Pacific Coast states, as well as most of Alaska.

Opponents and critics say the Deep Fork project was set up out of public sight. The study was made by the University of Oklahoma Biological Survey for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, but other state agencies say they knew nothing about it.

James R. Barnett, acting executive director of the Water Resources Board, wonders whether the state would be required to dedicate large amounts of water to maintain flow

for recreationists.

Another question is what effect the project would have on the dormant but not dead central Oklahoma navigation proposal.

The Farm Bureau has taken a stand to end the government's power to obtain land by condemning productive farms for wildlife and recreation, a right extended by the Legislature in 1910.

"We need to keep land in production, rather than eliminating it," says Robert S. Kerr Jr., president of the Water Development Foundation of Oklahoma Inc.

Unless strong public opposition develops, it appears that the Deep Fork project will go forward. "If the public is overwhelmingly opposed to it, we will reassess our position," said a federal spokesman.

The federal government obtained almost a billion acres of land through 370 treaties with Indian tribes between 1778 and 1868. Much of this land was granted to homesteaders to build up the nation. Now the government is taking back millions of acres from settlers.