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The Little Missouri Grasslands Study

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THE LITTLE MISSOURI GRASSLANDS STUDY

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During the past year, the North Dakota State University working in cooperation with Dickinson State College, state and federal agencies, local officials and representatives of private industry has been undertaking a multiple land use study for a nine county area in southwestern North Dakota. This project referred to as the Little Missouri Grasslands Study is under contract by the North Dakota State University with the Division of State Planning with funding being provided by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The area included consists of Dunn, Stark, Billings, Golden Valley, Hettinger, Slope, Adams and Bowman counties in State Planning Region VIII and McKenzie County in State Planning Region I — all of which are located in the southwestern part of the state.

The objective of the study is to provide detailed background socio-economic and environmental information on the nine county area and to develop descriptive models of potential future development. The models will describe the likely socio-economic and environmental implications of alternative futures based on varying degrees and combinations of agricultural, recreational, industrial and related development. The results of the study are designed for use by state, federal and local officials and residents of the study area in making decisions relating to a desired future for southwestern North Dakota.

Southwestern North Dakota, referred to as the West River Area, has generally been known by people from outside the state as a location of the rugged and picturesque North Dakota Badlands, Theodore Roosevelt National Memorial Park and the historic town of Medora. However, persons more familiar with this part of the state recognize and appreciate the value of additional resources that the area possesses. These resources include, but are not limited to, the following: (1) soils that are productive for growing a variety of crops and grasses as evidenced by the fact that agriculture serves as the main economic base for the area; (2) thousands of acres of beauti-

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ful rolling prairie and quiet open space valued by many for recreational uses; (3) the Little Missouri Grasslands—which includes over one million acres of land administered by the U. S. Forest Service with a long standing tradition of use for grazing cattle; (4) a large surface water supply in the Garrison Reservoir and the Missouri River under the management of the North Dakota State Water Commission; (5) unique land forms and ecological systems worthy of special study and preservation; (6) stands of Ponderosa Pine and Columnar Juniper not found elsewhere in the state; (7) the burning coal vein which was visited by more than 5,000 persons during 1973 is rapidly becoming a major tourist attraction; (8) natural areas with presently limited access under consideration for official designation as wilderness areas; (9) a large supply of big game managed by the North Dakota State Game and Fish Department through the issuing of a limited number of annual hunting permits; (10) habitat for rare and endangered species of wildlife; (11) numerous trails and building sites of historical significance; (12) sod houses built during the 1800's by early settlers—many still in excellent condition; (13) sites of paleontological and archaeological significance including one recent discovery of a 10 million year old turtle; (14) settlement patterns of area residents that have persisted over the years based on ethnic backgrounds that serve to enhance community character and enrich the historical significance of the area.

These are among the many valuable resources of southwestern North Dakota, many of which are difficult to quantify in terms of dollar value. All of these resources as well as others must be taken into consideration in planning for the future of this part of the state.

Until recently, there was every reason to believe that the future of southwestern North Dakota would remain very much the same as its predominantly agricultural past and there was little evidence of interest in planning for the area's future. However, recent interest and concern over the nation's power shortage has resulted in attention being focused on another natural resource abundant in the southwestern part of North Dakota—that resource being lignite (estimated at approximately 11 billion recoverable tons).

This large amount of readily extractable low sulphur lignite in southwestern North Dakota, along with the water supply available from the Garrison Reservoir and the Missouri River, make this part of the state extremely attractive to private industry for increasing electric power production by conventional methods and for producing synthetic gas made possible through advanced technology. This recent interest in locating new industrial development in southwestern North Dakota has resulted in growing concern on the part of many area residents as to the impact that large scale industrial de-

velopment would have on agriculture, the natural environment and the way of life of the residents of the area.

At a recent conference on Mining and Power Production held at Dickinson State College as a part of the Little Missouri Grasslands Study, representatives from major gas companies indicated interest in the development of 30 gasification plants in the West River Area. At the same conference, representatives from electric power industry indicated interest in expanding their present facilities and in constructing a considerable number of additional power plants. It is important that many questions be asked regarding the likely impact that proposed levels of future industrial development would have on southwestern North Dakota. Questions that must be considered in planning for the future include: (1) national interests and rights versus state interests and rights versus local interests and rights in determining the extent to which lignite mining and related development should take place; (2) the desirability of long term versus short term extraction and use of lignite which is a non-renewable resource; (3) the likely socio-economic and environmental impact that varying levels of industrial development would have on the area; (4) means of providing financial support for required services and facilities to meet the needs of increased population that would result from industrial development; (5) what steps can be taken to prevent a boom and bust economy that could result from over-extensive short term industrial development with later rapid decline in mining and related industrial activities in the event other energy sources become productive and more economic; (6) what means of land use controls and other regulations are available or required to successfully influence future growth and development.

The Little Missouri Grasslands Study is designed to provide meaningful information to decision makers for determining a desired balance of future agricultural, recreational and industrial development. The study will point out policies that if adopted and carried out would serve to provide direction for future agriculture, recreation and industrial development in southwestern North Dakota.

The study was started during August of 1972 and is scheduled for completion by the end of 1973. It will not be possible to satisfactorily answer many questions during the course of the study; however, the information to be provided will be a significant step toward furthering understanding of the nature of the area and its people and the socio-economic and environmental implications of potential future combinations of agricultural, recreational, industrial and related development.