

Recommendation 362
SRS NERP Support

Background

Unlike National Parks, National Environmental Research Parks (NERPs) provide a combination of pristine and impacted areas in which to conduct research. This combination is at the core of the NERP concept. With impacted areas and reference sites in close proximity, and a group of resident scientists, NERPs offer unparalleled opportunities for understanding human impacts on the environment. NERPs also preserve large tracts of natural or semi-natural habitat, benefitting native species and providing ample opportunities for long-term basic ecological research in a protected environment. Closed to the general public for over 67 years, these areas now teem with wildlife and abound with native vegetation, making them important conservation sites in a matrix of increasing human development.

Designated by the federal government as a NERP in 1972, the SRS serves as an outdoor laboratory for environmental research on energy technologies and the effects of human activities on the natural environment. With thousands of forested acres managed by the U.S. Forest Service, hundreds of freshwater wetlands and a rich bounty of native wildlife and vegetation, the site is a valuable venue for basic and applied research, education and public outreach. In the 46 years since the park was first named, the SRS has come to demonstrate the compatibility of nature, human technology and environmental research. Yet, in spite of the designation in the 1970s, the NERP concept does not currently carry the force of law, nor does it guarantee the long-term protection of this ecologically valuable land. Consequently, legislation was introduced in 2009 to permanently secure and designate this land area in perpetuity. This legislation is still pending having passed the house.

One of the earliest focuses of the research at SRS – and one that continues today – is baseline studies of the land area, including annotated checklists and taxonomic keys for many species of animals and plants, surveys of the status and distribution of certain populations, and special purpose surveys, such as those directed at specific habitats or endangered or threatened species. This basic research has resulted in an immense storehouse of valuable information about both the natural and human influenced areas on the site: to date more than 30 reports have been produced under the auspices of the SRS NERP and more than 3000 scientific papers published in the peer-reviewed literature.

Recommendation

In order to fully utilize the scientific knowledge provided by the NERP effort to date, the CAB recommends that the DOE provide additional resources to the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory to allow the laboratory to:

1. Reassess the definition and marking of the Set-Aside areas to ensure there is clear continuity in future studies.
2. Update the 30 plus baseline studies of the Set-Aside areas to understand current impacts from site activities. DOE should consider adding a new study of pollinators in the Set-Aside areas.
3. Make sure that this knowledge is more available to the public. The term public should include the scientific community as well as the regional communities.