

HNRC LBL Testimony

Thank you, Chairman Neguse and Ranking Member Fulcher. I come before you today to discuss the Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area, located in Western Kentucky and Tennessee; and the bill I recently introduced, the Land Between the Lakes Recreation and Heritage Act (H.R. 7399).

Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area, known as “LBL”, has a long and unique history. Before its formation, it was known as the land Between the Rivers and the area between the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers was home to Native American tribes. In the 1930s, the land was acquired by the Department of Interior. Later, the Tennessee Valley Authority assumed management and formed the rivers into Kentucky and Barkley Lakes for a flood control and hydroelectric dam project. This project displaced and forcibly relocated former residents. In 1998, the Land Between the Lakes Protection Act was signed into law and transferred the management of LBL to the Forest Service. In the transfer, the Protection Act emphasized the important goals of outdoor recreation, heritage, and environmental education.

Today, LBL is a treasured gem in my congressional district and throughout Kentucky and Tennessee. It has rich natural resources and offers opportunities for various recreation and environmental education experiences. Around two-thirds of the nation's population live within a six-hour drive, making it one of the most accessible National Recreation Areas in the United States. It encompasses 170,000 acres of forests and open lands and attracts over one and a half million visitors annually to ride ATVs, hunt, fish, boat, stay at one of LBL's 1,500 campsites, and enjoy nature. Visitors also enjoy interactive attractions like the Elk & Bison Prairie, Golden Pond Planetarium, the Woodlands Nature Station, and the 1850s Homeplace – a working farm and living history museum.

Unfortunately, the National Recreation Area faces many challenges, including deferred maintenance backlogs and understaffing. The dated facilities and infrastructure were developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the Forest Service's deferred maintenance backlog has led to unexpected closures and continual neglect of facilities and public attractions. Additionally, families have expressed dissatisfaction with the condition of roads leading to cemeteries in the Recreation Area and insufficient burial plot space. Overall,

the former residents have a historical and justified mistrust of the federal government's handling of their ancestral land.

For these reasons, I introduced the Land Between the Lakes Recreation and Heritage Act (H.R. 7399). This legislation addresses the backlog of deferred maintenance requests by requiring that user fees earned at LBL, like revenues from the successful Hillman Ferry campsite, will be invested back in the National Recreation Area for new facility upgrades or infrastructure projects. Additionally, the bill authorizes \$8,000,000 for the annual administration of LBL and specifies that those funds can not be used for salaries or expenses but must go towards projects beneficial to visitors.

Addressing the deferred maintenance issues, specifically poor road conditions will greatly help comfort families who have ancestors buried at LBL. My congressional office has been contacted countless times by constituents unable to visit LBL's cemeteries and pay their respects or attend a funeral due to road inaccessibility. Just last week, a constituent reached out to ask for help with this exact issue. The LBL Recreation and Heritage Act also provides clarity to the definition of former resident and specifies who is eligible for burial within LBL and provides qualified former residents and cemetery

associations the ability to request additional land to existing cemeteries for more plots.

It is my hope that the Land Between the Lakes Recreation and Heritage Act will assist former residents of LBL, their families, and the surrounding communities with the comfort of knowing the federal government is accountable for the land they hold so near to their hearts, while providing the Forest Service with the resources to properly manage this unique National Recreation Area.

I was grateful to draft this legislation with Senator McConnell who introduced the Senate companion bill, (S.3997), to the Land Between the Lakes Recreation and Heritage Act, and for Representative Mark Green who was an original cosponsor of the House version. I have also worked with and had countless conversations with local elected leaders and stakeholders in Lyon and Trigg Counties, the Friends of LBL organization, and the Between the Rivers organization to produce this legislation. I thank them for their advocacy and relentless pursuit of justice for the former residents of LBL and their families.

I have collected fifteen letters of support from local elected officials and stakeholders who recognize the significance of LBL for the region. I request unanimous consent to have these letters entered into the record of this hearing.