



Opening Statement of Chairman Bruce Westerman
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Legislative Hearing on Eight Recreation Bills
March 28, 2023

Public access to our public lands is crucial. All Americans should be able to get outdoors, recreate, and enjoy the beauty of our country. We need to take care of our lands to ensure the maximum outdoor experience. I have long been a proponent of conservation, stewardship, and recreation.

As Chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, I am committed to serious oversight of our federal land management agencies. While many Americans enjoy public lands, the lands are not accessible to all. Committee Republicans will encourage diverse use of public lands, quality of access, and proper management of funds by our agencies to address the growing backlog of deferred maintenance.

This hearing sets up a series of hearings in which we will address the pressing issues hampering the outdoor recreation economy. From small businesses, to local, rural, and gateway communities, the importance of recreation is felt all over this country. Sadly, costly permits and bureaucratic processes are stifling some of the fastest and most popular outdoor activities like hunting, fishing, biking, climbing, hiking, and camping.

One of the best places to recreate is the Ouachita National Forest, in my district. Visitors can fish, swim, camp, hike, bike, trail ride horses, and enjoy the outdoors, among other activities.

The 1.8 million-acre Ouachita National Forest in Arkansas and Oklahoma is a recreation destination to hundreds of thousands of people annually. One of the most popular sites within the Ouachita National Forest is the Albert Pike Recreation Area, which features hiking,

swimming, and other day uses. It was a popular place for overnight campers, with families and generations of families returning year after year.

The area was closed to overnight camping after a major flash flood tragically killed 20 people on June 11, 2010. In November 2020, the Forest Service initiated a planning process to determine which facilities and infrastructure would support the uses of the recreation area in the future. Under the Forest Service's final decision, no overnight camping would be permitted.

After the Forest Service's decision to permanently suspend all overnight camping, I have heard from countless constituents who expressed their disappointment and frustration at the decision. It would be a disservice to the community to permanently ban overnight camping and deprive folks who return to the area year after year to share the experiences they had as children with their families. I look forward to working with the Forest Service to allow for safe and responsible usage for years to come. We can safely refit the area to ensure the 2010 tragedy never occurs again.

That is why I introduced the Ouachita National Forest Overnight Camping Act to reopen overnight camping in the Ouachita National Forest closed as a result of the flood. First, the bill would require the Forest Service to re-open any campsites outside of the 100-year flood plain within thirty days of the bill's enactment. Second, it would identify areas suitable for overnight camping within six months. Finally, the bill would develop at least 54 campsites outside of the 100-year flood plain within 2 years of the bill's enactment.

I'd like to thank Mike Mills, the Secretary of the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism for joining us today. Along with being a constituent of mine, Secretary Mills ran the Buffalo Outdoor Center for over forty years. Secretary Mills knows firsthand the value that well managed public lands can have for small businesses and gateway

communities. I'd also like to thank our new Governor, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, for her leadership in outdoor recreation and for establishing the Natural State Initiative. Arkansas is already a world class destination for activities like mountain biking and rock climbing, and under her leadership we are poised to grow the Natural State's outdoor recreation economy even further.

As we continue to promote access to our federal lands, proper management, and enjoyment for all Americans, I know this Committee will be a leader in these conversations. I look forward to working in a bipartisan and bicameral fashion to advance comprehensive legislation supporting outdoor recreation on federal lands and waters in the 118th Congress.