

Secretary Mike Mills  
Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism  
Tuesday, March 28, 2023  
118th Congress, 1st Session  
Subcommittee on Federal Lands  
10:15 a.m. | Longworth House Office Building

In support of H.R. 1667 to require the Secretary of Agriculture to identify and develop campsites and related facilities for public use in the Ouachita National Forest, and for other purposes.

Good morning,

I am pleased to join you today. It's particularly exciting to be here with the Natural Resources Committee, which is chaired by the Honorable Bruce Westerman, my fellow Arkansan. We are proud of him. And we are proud of the work he does in the service of Arkansas.

My name is Mike Mills. I am the Secretary of the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism. Where, with the hard work of a dedicated staff of fellow Arkansans whom I'm deeply proud of, we seek to meet our mission to protect and promote our state's natural, cultural and historical resources, contributing to a thriving economy and high quality of life.

Since January, I've had the honor to serve as secretary under Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders for the people of Arkansas. In her inaugural address, Gov. Sanders cast a new vision to unlock the full potential of The Natural State by leveraging our state's unmatched natural beauty to promote tourism and grow our outdoor economy.

We want to ensure that Arkansas does not just compete in this space, but rather, we envision Arkansas as a true national leader in outdoor recreation and the outdoor economy. We plan to market the beauty and potential of The Natural State to the world for recreation tourism and outdoor business opportunities.

All my experiences have led me to this moment and place. One of my most valuable experiences has been my work in developing the Buffalo Outdoor Center in Ponca. For over 40 years, I worked in partnership with the National Park Service and the surrounding community to build a business that provided access to our country's first national river, the Buffalo National River. Our business served as a guide and access point for outdoor adventures along the Buffalo River, one of Arkansas's, and frankly the country's, most beautiful and precious places.

Adventure runs through the heart of man and to be able to discover that, feel that, share that – it will leave a lasting impression in your heart forever. And it will be a gift that can span generations. I truly believe that.

When thinking of that gift, the importance of access to the outdoors is top of mind. Access provides our residents and visitors across the world the ability to engage with our greatest natural resources, which are gifts from God. These gifts are to be enjoyed, respected and revered by us today, and we must conserve and preserve them for future generations to also enjoy.

The issue of access to these natural places leads me to the reason I am here today. I am here to offer my support and to convey the support of Gov. Sanders for Congressman Westerman's legislation, which seeks to identify and develop campsites at Albert Pike Recreation Area. This unique area has long been a draw for tourism and outdoor recreation in Arkansas, largely due to its beauty and its natural offerings.

An unfortunate and unforeseen tragedy led to the area's closure. In 2010, a flash flood from the Little Missouri River resulted in the death of 20 people. Since the area's closure, we've come a long way in analyzing the flooding event and advancing technology to prevent a similar outcome in the future. I believe we are at a point in time where we must move forward to make this special place accessible once again.

In doing so, we will open countless opportunities for young families and new residents while providing our seasoned residents joy and adventure in a beloved location. The plan that the Congressman has set forth will allow thorough but pragmatic movement towards ultimately reopening the Albert Pike campgrounds. It will provide access to the rugged Ouachita Mountains and clear streams, providing hiking, fishing and other recreational opportunities for all. I fully support the new legislation and ask for your support.

Arkansas and the access to her natural beauty is my life. I've spent my life and career working through challenges that come with building and operating a business off that beauty. My experience gives me a unique perspective in this new role as we work to develop the next chapter in Arkansas's story. I'm excited to help craft outdoor recreation opportunities for future generations so that they can enjoy and care for nature just as we do.

My story of the Buffalo River is an important one, as it illustrates one of Arkansas's greatest attributes: our relationships and partnerships. Our people have long come together for our common good — whether it is in business where relationships created companies like Walmart, JB Hunt, Tyson, Dillard's and Stephens; and our conservation of public lands like the Buffalo River, which is managed by the National Park Service; to the development of our 52-state park system — a crown jewel and arguably the best state parks system in the country.

The Natural State is the mountain biking capitol of the world. The Monument Trails are a collection of world-class, mountain biking destinations within Arkansas State parks.

Oz Trails is a world-class network of shared-use trails in Bentonville, Arkansas that give experiences unrivaled elsewhere. The duck-hunting capitol of the world resides in our rice fields of the Delta.

Our relationships and partnerships have fostered immense opportunity and provided access to public areas, which we continue to build on today.

Gov. Sanders recently signed an Executive Order creating The Natural State Initiative and appointed her husband, First Gentleman and avid outdoorsman Bryan Sanders, to serve as chairman. The initiative brings together some of the brightest minds in outdoor recreation from across our state. These are businesspeople and conservationists who have pioneered, developed and supported entrepreneurship and recreational development, and excelled in their respective fields. We are banding together under the common goal of providing diverse access to our natural resources, focusing on our outdoor

economy, both within government and in the private sector. Adventure, if shared with the world, will act as a powerful magnet that will benefit our state both in quality of life and economic opportunity.

In Arkansas, we have been hard at work on big goals and seeing some real movement. Places like Mena — where today our department is partnering with local, U.S. Forest Service and private partners to explore the full potential of trails that would connect our state park atop a nearby mountain, through the National Forest right to Main Street Mena, which is beautiful. In this way, we would capitalize on existing infrastructure, welcome new uses and thus become a destination for all to explore and enjoy. On the other side of the state, Arkansas and our partner, the Walton Family Foundation, have invested \$40 million to build the Delta Heritage Trail — a gravel trail that will span almost 100 miles from Barton to Lexa. This trail will wind through small Delta towns, revitalizing them by welcoming new businesses and serving as a new tourist destination.

Our first state park, Petit Jean State Park, just celebrated its 100th year. At this park, we have forged a public-private partnership to open access that will make it one of the best climbing destinations in our state. We are also evaluating a Via Ferrata climbing system that would allow the most novice climber to experience an epic climb.

Arkansas is home to various networked gravel routes, including the Arkansas High Country Route, made up of long-existing infrastructure that has become a gravel rider's dream. We are working alongside our various public land partners to provide infrastructure that makes these routes both exciting and supportive of travel.

Our state park system, in partnership with the nonprofit Arkansas Parks and Recreation Foundation, has created a collection of world-class mountain biking destinations that we call Monument Trails. These shared-use trails are professionally crafted by some of the world's best trail builders and are seamlessly woven into the beautiful landscape of the Arkansas State Parks.

Just like we've done with our trails and gravel routes, multi-agency and private partners are working to build greater access to our rivers. You see, it is not just conservation and preservation. Access to outdoor recreation inspires generations of Arkansans to care for and champion the future of our natural places, ensuring that we remain The Natural State.

All of this work is not just busy work. There is a purpose and, quite frankly, a need. Today, children spend more time inside, hooked to screens and isolated from nature. The isolation creates loneliness and prevents a child from understanding community and the greater world outside.

People are not meant to be isolated. We are meant to explore, run, enjoy, hike, hunt, fish, discover and have fun. Those joys are slipping out of our hands as we clutch onto devices. The urgency is real and our fight to get kids outside, be healthy and learn about The Natural State is now. We cannot wait. Our access to the outdoors and these recreational opportunities gives us the greatest chance to encourage kids to experience the excitement and rewards of time spent outdoors.