

**Statement of  
U.S. Forest Service, United States Department of Agriculture  
Before the  
House Natural Resources Committee  
Subcommittee on Federal Lands**

**Regarding**

**H.R. 3971 - Flatside Wilderness Additions Act**

**June 27, 2024**

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Forest Service, to discuss H.R. 3971, the "Flatside Wilderness Additions Act."

H.R. 3971 amends the Arkansas Wilderness Act of 1984, adding 2,215 acres in the Ouachita National Forest as wilderness under the National Wilderness Preservation System. This parcel would be an addition to the existing Flatside Wilderness. The bill also renames the newly expanded Flatside Wilderness, including the 2019 addition, as the "Flatside-Bethune Wilderness."

USDA recognizes the importance of wilderness areas, and the Forest Service embraces its mission to steward and safeguard wilderness character in Congressionally designated wilderness. USDA supports H.R. 3971 and would like to work with the Subcommittee and the sponsor of this bill to address some technical concerns.

The Forest Service would like to draw attention to the 720 acres of non-federal mineral rights underlying the proposed wilderness, all believed to be in private ownership. The proposed wilderness would be subject to pre-existing mineral rights and potential development even if Congress were to designate these additional parcels as wilderness. We are currently exploring options for consolidating these mineral rights into federal ownership and would like to work with the Subcommittee as we explore options.

The legislation as written establishes a 60-foot setback for Forest Service Road 793. The Forest Service recommends changing this setback to 66 feet, which would make the proposed wilderness addition consistent with the current Flatside Wilderness boundary legal description.

Renaming all portions of the wilderness, including the existing Flatside Wilderness, the 2019 addition, and the current proposed addition to "Flatside-Bethune Wilderness" will allow the Forest Service to maintain consistency in signage and minimize confusion. The Forest Service supports this consistent naming convention.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on HR 3971. I welcome any questions from the Subcommittee.