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H.R. 6843, To expand the boundaries of the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area to include  
Lafourche Parish, Louisiana

Chairman Westerman, Ranking Member Grijalva, Subcommittee Chairman Tiffany, Vice Chairman Curtis, and other distinguished members of the Subcommittee, my name is Justin Lemoine, and I am the Executive Director of the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area (ANHA), a nationally significant landscape stretching from the confluence of the Mississippi and Red Rivers in Central Louisiana to the Gulf of Mexico at Morgan City.

Your past and continued support of the National Heritage Area program is greatly appreciated. I am respectfully submitting testimony to support H.R. 6843, To expand the boundaries of the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area to include Lafourche Parish, Louisiana introduced by Representative Steve Scalise. S. 3542, a companion bill, has been introduced by Senator Bill Cassidy.

Constituents of Lafourche Parish approached Atchafalaya National Heritage Area staff in 2021 with a desire to expand the boundary of the heritage area to include the region as, though physically and culturally connected to the heritage area, it was not included in the original 2006 enabling legislation. A review by ANHA staff revealed that Lafourche is the only parish through which Bayou Lafourche flows that is not included in the heritage area. Bayou Lafourche represents the eastern boundary of the historic Atchafalaya Basin. The Louisiana Landowners Association, Lafourche Parish Government, Nicholls State University, the Atchafalaya Trace Commission (governing body of the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area), the Office of Lieutenant Governor Billy Nungesser, private entities, community groups, and the cities and towns within Lafourche Parish have offered support of this boundary expansion legislation.

### **Atchafalaya National Heritage Area Overview**

The Atchafalaya National Heritage Area (ANHA) program is housed within the Louisiana Office of Cultural Development, an office of the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism. The ANHA program works closely with the Office of Tourism, the Office of State Parks, and the many divisions within the Office of Cultural Development to amplify their work and fulfill the ANHA program's goals of supporting cultural, natural, and recreational resource preservation and enhancement. Outside of its state agency, ANHA also works closely with the state's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, Louisiana Economic Development, the Louisiana Department of Education, and other state agencies, local municipalities, and public educational institutions in fulfillment of its mission. ANHA's work annually leverages the federal investment at well above the 1:1 match requirement. Since its authorization, the program has provided technical and financial assistance to local communities throughout its parishes and helped to lead efforts

related to cultural interpretation, environmental stewardship, recreation enhancement, historic preservation, and strengthening the region's identity.

The ANHA is comprised of 14 parishes in south central Louisiana. The heritage area was first conceptualized as a driving loop called the Atchafalaya Trace with a path looping around the Atchafalaya Basin floodway. This path would highlight this signature water resource and its role in the region's culture and economy. In the late 1990s, the Louisiana legislature designated the Atchafalaya Trace as a state heritage area. With broad local and state support, in 2006 the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area was designated by Congress.

As the namesake of the heritage area, the Atchafalaya River and Basin is the centerpiece of a region whose extensive network of waterways strongly influence the region's culture and identity. South Louisiana's water story is a core theme of the ANHA program. Those who called the region home throughout history cultivated and continue to nourish a unique culture along these waterways. Often identified by the popular terms 'Cajun' and 'Creole,' the regional identity is a result of the intersection of Native American, African, European, Caribbean, and Acadian exiles whose language and traditions come together in this dynamic alluvial region. The strong language influence of these cultures developed the local Louisiana French dialect and the Kouri-Vini languages. Woven with other regional cultural characteristics, like the food and music, and this area has earned its moniker 'America's Foreign Country.'

### **The Geographical History of the Heritage Area**

At its northern end, the heritage area begins with the Mississippi River delta and the historic confluence of the Mississippi and Red Rivers. From there, the Atchafalaya River winds through the Acadiana region, paralleling the Mississippi River as it winds south to the Gulf of Mexico at Morgan City. This southern portion of the heritage area is often called Bayou Country. Like the Atchafalaya River, Bayou Lafourche is also a distributary of the Mississippi River. This key waterway, a former path of the Mississippi River, has historically been used for commercial and recreational navigation. Bayou Lafourche also provides clean drinking water to thousands in the region and serves the agricultural economy. The bayou contributes to marsh nourishment and land building along Louisiana's delicate coastline thanks to the sediment and nutrient-laden waters it receives from the Mississippi River at Donaldsonville.

At the junction of the Mississippi, Red, and Atchafalaya Rivers, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built the Old River Control Complex for flood mitigation. Built over the course of nearly half a century, this 5-structure complex was intended to stabilize the Mississippi River's path and maintain regional navigation for commercial shipping vessels. If not for the construction of this complex in the 20th century, the Mississippi River would most certainly have changed courses from its current path to that of the Atchafalaya River, bypassing major port cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans and adversely impacting commerce and industry for the entire central United States.

The complexity of the Atchafalaya Basin's water story goes further back in time and includes the history of Louisiana's native peoples, early European settlers' use of it for navigation, and ultimately the ongoing fight for flood control. This fight began as efforts of individual property owners, then local and state entities. After the Flood of 1927, Congress mandated flood control and mitigation as the responsibility of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The continued efforts to manage the Mississippi River and its many tributaries and distributaries help to ensure that the lands in the states along their many courses are inhabitable and that their fertile delta soils are a productive part of the United States' robust agricultural economy.

After decades of public input, the U.S. Congress and the Corps transformed the largest freshwater swamp in North America, the Atchafalaya Basin. What was once an area that stretched from Bayou Teche on the west to Bayou Lafourche on the east was now a fraction of its original size. This new floodway became a critical component of the USACE's efforts to control flooding along the Mississippi and Red Rivers which drain 41% of the continental US.

### **The Regions of the Heritage Area**

The Atchafalaya National Heritage Area is comprised of four regions: the Upper Region, the Area Between Two Rivers, the Bayou Teche Corridor, and the Coastal Region. Each region's relationship to water is based upon its location along the Atchafalaya's varied hydrologic system.

**The Upper Region**, which forms the beginning of the ANHA, includes the parishes of Concordia, Avoyelles, and Pointe Coupee. Concordia Parish, the northernmost point of the Upper Region, has rivers on three sides that merge into one river. The parish is contained within levee borders except for one side and has 300 miles of waterbodies surrounding it. Lakes and rivers provide an abundance of water sports and recreation while wildlife refuges make hunting and fishing popular. Fertile, rich soil makes agriculture, music, historical agricultural homesites, and museums the area's main attractions. Vidalia sits on the banks of the Mississippi River.

Avoyelles Parish is south of Concordia Parish and contains the banks of the old Mississippi River channel. Avoyelles Parish is home to Grand Cote National Wildlife Refuge, Lake Ophelia National Wildlife Refuge, Spring Bayou Wildlife Management Area, and other public lands. ANHA's work in Avoyelles includes recreation improvements for paddle access within public lands and creative placemaking initiatives in the form of public art. The area was originally settled in 300 BC and today is known for its traditions in music, food, and culture. Native Americans play a significant role in this area evidenced by the presence of three large pre-historic burial mounds. The parish is home to the federally recognized Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana.

Pointe Coupee Parish is home to one of the oldest settlements in the Mississippi River Valley and enjoys Creole culture at its finest. False River, a lake located in the parish, is an example of an oxbow lake formed when the Mississippi changed its course and cut off its former path. The landscape in Pointe Coupee consists of prairies and back swamp and also includes the Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge. It is the physical location of the Morganza Spillway, one of the main control systems the Army Corps of Engineers has in place to handle major flooding. It is designed to divert water during floods from the Mississippi River to the Atchafalaya Basin. The Morganza Spillway is a human-made structure designed to prevent the Mississippi River from forming a new channel to the Gulf of Mexico via the Atchafalaya River. Here, ANHA interprets the water story through a series of interpretive kiosks and supports community festivals and events.

The **Between Two Rivers** region consists of four parishes: East Baton Rouge, West Baton Rouge, Ascension, and Iberville. The Baton Rouge parishes were originally settled in 8000 BC. These parishes were home to the Houmas and Bayougoula tribes. Baton Rouge, the capital of Louisiana, is in East Baton Rouge Parish, and it is also home to a state rural life museum, Louisiana State University, and Southern University.

Across the river, West Baton Rouge Parish is home to the Cinclare Plantation Historic District, a sugar cane mill with a town of its own, and Port Allen. In Port Allen, you will find the Port Allen Lock which connects the Mississippi River to the Intracoastal Waterway. It also has several sites of interest including the West Baton Rouge Museum, the City of Port Allen Railroad Depot, Mississippi Riverfront Development, Scott's Cemetery, and the Port of Greater Baton Rouge.

Iberville Parish is a rural parish that is emblematic of humans living in harmony with the natural environment. Waterways are a dominant theme in the parish. The Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge is found in Iberville parish as well as the Mississippi River, bayous, and entrances to the 800,000 acres of the Atchafalaya Basin. Here, ANHA has partnered with community groups to host cultural festivals, develop multi-use cultural museums, and enhance outdoor recreation.

Ascension Parish covers over 300 square miles and spans both banks of the Mississippi River. Several Native American tribes settled in this area as hunters and farmers. They were known to use pottery, baskets, and ceramics. Later, they were joined by the Acadians from Nova Scotia who were exiled and eventually settled in this part of the region. These groups were joined by many diverse settlers, such as French, Italian, Spanish, German, African, and English, to name a few. Once again, traditions melded together to create the rich Cajun culture of the area.

The **Bayou Teche Corridor** consists of four parishes: St. Landry, St. Martin, Iberia, and Lafayette. St. Landry Parish has a long history dating back to prehistoric times. Two distinct Native American tribes, the Appaloussa, and the Attakapas, lived between the Atchafalaya and Sabine Rivers. This area later became home to Acadians, French, Spanish, Caribbean, French Creoles, Spanish Creoles, and Africans. In 1805, it was established as the largest parish in Louisiana but later was divided into six parishes that include Calcasieu, Evangeline, Jeff Davis, Beauregard, and Allen. Nationally protected areas in St. Landry Parish are the Atchafalaya National Wildlife Refuge and the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park Site. ANHA partners with cultural organizations to preserve the area's unique Zydeco and Cajun music assets and native plant groups to interpret the delicate Cajun prairie ecosystem.

St. Martin Parish is unique in that it has three distinct geographical areas—the Atchafalaya Basin, the prairie, and the Bayou Teche area. St. Martin Parish reflects the beauty of nature in its bald cypress trees, oak trees, moss, sugarcane fields, low-lying swamp, and endless environment of lakes and rivers. “Evangeline” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, tells of a young woman sitting on the banks of Bayou Teche. The ANHA program has helped to interpret the story of Evangeline while helping to preserve historic sites and enhance access to cultural resources within the parish.

Originally settled by the Spanish, Iberia Parish is known for its Cajun, Creole, and Asian cuisine. It also has several tourist attractions such as tropical tours on tranquil islands, swamp tours, stately home tours, outdoor sport and recreation options, the famous Tabasco factory tours, festivals, fais do do street dances, fishing rodeos, cook-offs, and much more.

Concluding the Bayou Teche Corridor parishes is Lafayette Parish, the smallest parish in Louisiana. The French-speaking Acadians and Creoles of African, West Indian, and European descent settled in this area and brought their Roman Catholic belief system. Lafayette is the heart of Acadiana and the Cajun and Creole cultures are its lifeblood. It is a place where music, dance, love of family, storytelling, food, and *joie de vivre* reign supreme. Lafayette is a place that reflects the past through the present with beautiful scenery and a culture that lives on but adapts to the challenges of each season with strength and a determination to survive. Lafayette is also the home of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL). Here, ANHA partners with the Center for Louisiana Studies at ULL to compile the stories that make up Louisiana's cumulative history and ensure that resources are available in person and print for generations to come.

The parishes of St. Mary, Assumption, and Terrebonne make up the **Coastal Region**. St. Mary Parish is 613 square miles of land and 506 square miles of water and is recognized as a gateway to the Atchafalaya Basin. This parish is also home to Bayou Teche and the Bayou Teche National

Wildlife Refuge. The earliest settlers of the coastal region were the Chitimacha Tribe who settled near the area bayous. Their name means “people of many waters.” Their diet consisted of corn for hominy meal, fish, wild game, and shellfish of the area. The tribe is well-known for its baskets made with wild cane reed dyed naturally and woven into geometric designs. Today the reservation encompasses 283 acres of land with 350 tribal members. Other groups that settled in this parish were Dutch, English, Acadians, German, Danish, and Irish. The numerous sugar plantations and sugar mills made this area an important sugar port. The sugar industry continues to thrive today through modern agricultural practices. St. Mary Parish has also been a vital source of shrimp, fish, seafood processing, salt, boat building, oil, gas, carbon black, and was once home to the world’s largest cypress sawmill.

Assumption Parish has natural waterways that connect the Mississippi Industrial Corridor to the north and the Gulf of Mexico in the south, while also providing a gateway to the Atchafalaya Basin. Assumption Parish is known for its rivers, bayous, sugar, agriculture, estuaries, scenery, recreation, historic communities, agricultural industry, and ties to the French and Spanish cultures. The Louisiana French language is still spoken throughout the parish and will be a feature of a new interpretive center in development by local community champions through a partnership with ANHA.

Terrebonne Parish is the second largest parish in Louisiana and its entire southern coast is on the Gulf of Mexico. Over ninety percent of the parish is wetlands or open water. The parish is home to the Mandalay National Wildlife Refuge and Terrebonne Bay, as well as many bayous and waterways including the Intracoastal Waterway. The inhabitants of Terrebonne, like those of neighboring Lafourche, have always lived on what nature provided. Terrebonne oysters are known internationally as some of the finest oysters in the world. Seafood (20 percent of all Louisiana seafood), wildlife (hunting and trapping), sugar cane, sugar mills, fur trading, logging, and oil and gas have long provided a livelihood for the residents. Terrebonne Parish is recognized as being a gateway port for one of the heaviest concentrations of offshore oil service companies in the state. The Houmas tribe were some of the first settlers in this area, followed by the Acadians (exiled French colonists) and the Spanish. The authentic Acadian culture, diverse environment, wildlife, agriculture, historic homesteads, seafood, natural mineral resources, and unique location offer many educational, recreational, and economic opportunities in today’s world.

### **Lafourche Parish**

Lafourche Parish covers nearly all the length of Bayou Lafourche and immediately abuts Assumption and Terrebonne parishes and the Gulf of Mexico. Early European settlers explored the waterway known as “LaFourche Des Chetimachas,” the fork of the Chitimachas, which was eventually shortened to “Lafourche,” hence the name of the parish and the bayou that bisects it. The parish is located within the Barataria and Terrebonne estuaries. Bayou Lafourche, or Fork Bayou, is a distributary of the Mississippi River. Lafourche has 1,068 square miles of land area and 406 square miles of open water and is the eighth-largest parish in Louisiana by total area. It was originally the northern part of Lafourche Interior Parish, which consisted of the present parishes of Lafourche and Terrebonne.

Louisiana’s coastal parishes house a wealth of economic industries ranging from oil and gas to seafood to water-based recreation and hunting. Lafourche Parish is home to many public waters and public lands including East Timbalier Island National Wildlife Refuge, Lake Boeuf Wildlife Management Area, and Pointe-aux-Chenes Wildlife Management Area. Port Fourchon, a bustling port terminal where Bayou Lafourche meets the Gulf of Mexico is not only a hub for the state’s

energy industry, but also an access point for recreational activities with developed recreational infrastructure.

Lafourche Parish is home to many historic communities including the City of Thibodaux and the towns of Lockport and Golden Meadow. E.D. White State Historic Site, a public museum located along Bayou Lafourche, depicts the history of the parish, the agricultural industry in the region, the many cultures of Lafourche, and the enslavement of peoples as a part of the region's agricultural development. The site is a reminder of the region's past that intrinsically ties the present to life on the water. The parish is filled with dozens of historic sites, all connected to the cumulative cultural identity of the Atchafalaya region.

The Jean Lafitte National Park and Preserve Wetlands Acadian Cultural Center (WACC) is located on Bayou Lafourche in Thibodaux, the seat of the parish. The WACC tells the story of the Acadian exiles who settled along Louisiana's bayous and created a distinctive Cajun culture based on life in a watery realm. The center shares their way of life through a film, special and permanent exhibits, musical performances, and boat tours of Bayou Lafourche that connect to other important sites like the E.D. White State Historic Site.

Bayou Lafourche, which begins at Donaldsonville in Ascension Parish, is the parish's central waterway. Once a natural tributary of the Mississippi River, it now is controlled by a pump station where it begins at the Mississippi. Lafourche is inextricably tied to Assumption and Ascension Parishes culturally and physically through Bayou Lafourche. The Bayou Lafourche Fresh Water District (BLFWD) is tasked with management of the waterway. The district balances water quality, water quantity, recreational accessibility, drinking and agricultural water supplies, and coastal nourishment through a comprehensive management strategy. The Friends of Bayou Lafourche is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to raise the awareness of the importance of Bayou Lafourche and its revitalization through education and informational outreach, and by the creation of recreation and beautification opportunities along the bayou. ANHA has partnered with both organizations in nearby Assumption and Ascension parishes throughout its history and would continue that work into Lafourche Parish upon approval of boundary expansion.

The commercial fishing industries in Lafourche Parish are strongly connected to those in neighboring parishes within the ANHA. The coastal fishing industry has been active for as long as the region has been inhabited. Native Americans lived off the land and flourished in this watery region. Their foodways and cultural traditions continue to this day. Early Europeans and newly resettled Acadians made home along Bayou Lafourche. Their lifeways of hunting, fishing, and trapping have been handed down through time. Many commercial operations are family-owned and have been passed down from generation to generation. These fishermen are often born and raised in the area and rarely leave the bayou region. They are the torchbearers of the bayou culture of Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes and the seafood they catch contributes to the state's robust seafood industry. Lafourche lies in the heart of the state's vast coastal wetlands. These bayous, marshlands, and fertile farmlands are defining features of this area and create an ideal environment for many seafood species including shrimp, crabs, oysters, and finfish.

Water-based recreation along the coast includes recreational fishing, ecotourism, and passive recreational boating throughout the vast wetlands and marshes. These waterways play a vital role in the culture and the region's sportsman economy. Tour groups and charter fishing businesses work with the parish's tourism agency, Louisiana's Cajun Bayou and those in Terrebonne,

Assumption, and St. Mary parishes to teach residents and visitors about the value of the ecosystem. Nicholls State University is situated in the City of Thibodaux. The university is currently building a new coastal center that, together with other state universities, will drive research and innovation on best practices for coastal management. The University, along with the Barataria Terrebonne National Estuary Program (BTNEP), utilizes an applied science approach along with community engagement to help tackle the many challenges facing this delicate region. ANHA has a seat on BTNEP's quarterly management conference board.

The Louisiana National Estuarine Research Reserve site, recently designated by NOAA, further offers unique opportunities for partnership between the ANHA and organizations located in the heritage area's coastal parishes. The Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium (LUMCON), Nicholls State University, the heritage area, and other regional groups in St. Mary, Terrebonne, and Lafourche parish, will work with the state's Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) to partner on educational, outreach, and research opportunities for implementation of the LaNERR management plan. The Atchafalaya National Heritage Area serves as a vital partner in this network for historical and ecological interpretation as the estuarine environment provides yet another example of the critical waterbodies of the heritage area and the culture it nourishes. The history of the region's development, how the people have lived off the land, and the challenges they continue to face in a dynamic coastal environment are what weave these coastal parishes together like a traditional Chitimacha basket.

The Cajun identity that is strong throughout the Atchafalaya region is found in Louisiana's Cajun Bayou: Lafourche Parish. Cajun music is an art form unique to South Louisiana. While the once robust Cajun music scene has faded over time, advocates are working hard to sustain these traditions for future generations. The Cajun Music Preservation Society (CMPS) was formed to ensure that traditional Cajun music remains part of the vibrant culture in Lafourche for decades to come by promoting traditional Cajun music, hosting live Cajun jams, and hosting the Swamp Stomp Music Series. Adding Lafourche to the heritage area boundary will enable the program staff to better engage with organizations like CMPS to further preserve and enhance these cultural organizations and amplify their impact. Lafourche is also home to the Cajun Heritage Festival, a yearly event where locals express their memory and talent in the form of wooden carvings. This event serves as an educational program to teach younger generations about the wildlife and culture of the region.

Lafourche Parish and its many cultural assets weave together with Terrebonne, Assumption, and Ascension parishes to preserve and promote the authentic and important Cajun culture. Incorporating Lafourche Parish into the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area will enable the program to support, preserve, and enhance the cultural, natural, and recreational resources as it does throughout the area. To best serve the bayou area, the program must be able to work throughout the entire community. Water and culture know no boundaries. The addition of Lafourche Parish, a region that so fully honors the water and French-language themes of the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area, would allow ANHA staff to tell a more complete story of this unique piece of the nation's history.