

Ocmulgee Mounds National Park Redesignation Act

Economic Impact Briefing

Prepared for Visit Macon | Tourism Economics, An Oxford Economics Company | June 2026

Executive Summary

Visit Macon engaged Tourism Economics to review academic and applied research, federal economic data, and real-world examples from recent National Park redesignations to assess the potential implications of H.R. 9416 Ocmulgee Mounds National Park Redesignation Act. This bill redesignates the existing Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park as “Ocmulgee Mounds National Park”, upgrading it from historical park to full national park status. Our key findings are as follows.

- **The designation of Ocmulgee Mounds as a National Park represents a significant economic opportunity for Macon and the surrounding region.** We anticipate designation would bring an increase in visitation, spending, and associated economic impact activity, including additional jobs, wages, and tax revenue.
 - **Research indicates that National Park designation typically increases visitation.** Research consistently finds that the National Park label functions as a nationally recognized tourism brand, drawing more visitors than other National Park Service designations. National Parks average approximately 1.4 million visitors per year, compared to approximately 500,000 for National Historical Parks like Ocmulgee today.
 - **More visitors generate broader economic benefits.** Visitor spending flows into local hotels, restaurants, retail businesses, and recreation services. Research shows these benefits represent net additions to regional economic activity, not simply a redistribution of existing demand.
 - **Two recent redesignations confirm these effects in practice.** New River Gorge (redesignated 2020) saw visitation grow 43 percent and visitor spending nearly double within three years. White Sands (redesignated 2019) saw consistent gains in both visitation and spending, closely matching pre-designation projections.
 - **Ocmulgee Mounds is well positioned to benefit.** The park has nationally significant cultural resources, established visitor infrastructure, recreational assets, and strong community support — characteristics associated with stronger-than-average redesignation outcomes.
 - **Previous analysis projects substantial economic gains for Middle Georgia.** Site-specific economic analysis projects that redesignation could add more than \$206 million in annual economic activity, over 2,800 new jobs, and nearly \$30 million in new annual tax revenue over a 15-year period.
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I. Literature Review

We reviewed academic research, National Park Service reporting, and applied research. The research shows that redesignation is consistently associated with sustained increases in visitation, visitor spending, employment, and income in surrounding communities. We noted several studies in particular as being robust research addressing these impacts in historical situations and have summarized key results as follows.

Szabó & Ujhelyi (2024)

National Park designation causes measurable improvements in local economic performance. This is the central finding of Szabó and Ujhelyi (2024), published in the *Journal of Public Economics*, which provides the most rigorous causal evidence currently available on this question. Using a robust causal research design covering the full history of National Park System units, the authors isolate the effect of designation from other factors including park size, federal spending, and underlying economic trends.

The mechanism is visitor spending: economic gains flow from increased visitor activity that the National Park designation, functioning as a nationally recognized tourism brand, generates in surrounding communities—not from federal expenditure or physical expansion of conserved land. Critically, the study also compares outcomes across NPS designation categories and finds that the National Park label produces substantially stronger effects than alternatives such as National Historical Park.

Headwaters Economics (2018)

Visitation increases following redesignation are well documented and, on average, substantial. Headwaters Economics (2018) examined eight historical cases in which National Monuments were redesignated as National Parks, finding an average 21 percent increase in visitation in the five years after redesignation compared to the five years prior. National Parks in the Intermountain West also showed overnight visitation growing by 17 percent from 2000 to 2016, while overnight visits to National Monuments in the same region fell by 11 percent—a gap that matters economically, since overnight visitors spend significantly more in gateway communities than day-trippers.

This report developed site-specific economic projections for White Sands National Monument before its redesignation. These projections accurately anticipated post-designation visitation increases.

National Park Service (NPS) Visitor Spending Effects Reports (2012–present)

The economic benefits of National Park visitation are substantial and well-quantified. The National Park Service's annual Visitor Spending Effects (VSE) report series represents the federal government's standard methodology for estimating the economic contributions of park visitation to gateway communities. The most recent report (2024) documents \$29 billion in visitor spending near NPS sites, supporting 340,100 jobs and generating \$56.3 billion in total national economic output.

The VSE framework—linking visitor counts, spending-per-party data by lodging segment, and regional multipliers—establishes the current economic baseline and provides the structure for projecting potential impacts of designation-driven increase in visitation.

Congressional Research Service Assessment (2023)

The Congressional Research Service (CRS) synthesizes the academic and applied literature on National Park designation for Members of Congress. Its 2023 report, *National Park System: What Do the Different Park Titles Signify?*, concludes that National Park designation generally attracts more visitors than other National Park Service unit designations, while noting that redesignation

outcomes vary across individual sites. Drawing on Weiler and Seidl (2004) and Headwaters Economics (2018), the report documents that National Parks average 1.4 million visitors per unit compared to 0.5 million for National Historical Parks (CRS, 2023, footnote 35, based on 2022 NPS visitor statistics). These comparisons reflect average visitation across designation categories and should not be interpreted as causal estimates of the effect of redesignation; rather, they illustrate the broader differences in visitor demand associated with National Park status.

The report also notes that evidence on individual redesignation outcomes is mixed: not every redesignated unit has shown a subsequent increase in visitation, and gains from the name change have not always offset losses from other factors. This is an important caveat.

Overall Findings from the Literature

The four sources reviewed here form a coherent progression: peer-reviewed causal evidence (Szabó & Ujhelyi), applied redesignation analysis (Headwaters Economics), federal economic methodology (NPS Visitor Spending Effects), and congressional synthesis (CRS). Across all four, the conclusion is consistent: National Park designation increases visitor demand and generates quantifiable economic benefits for gateway communities. Redesignation is associated with sustained gains in visitor spending and employment, and net additions to regional economic activity rather than redistribution of existing demand.

II. Case Studies

Recent redesignations provide relevant case study examples. New River Gorge and White Sands are particularly instructive because both involve redesignating existing National Park Service units rather than establishing entirely new parks. Their post-designation outcomes were broadly consistent with the visitation and economic effects identified in the literature.

Comparison of Recent Redesignations

Metric	New River Gorge NP&P	White Sands NP	Relevance to Ocmulgee
Redesignated	December 2020	December 2019	Both recent; outcomes observable
Prior NPS designation	National River	National Monument	Like Ocmulgee: existing NPS unit
Pre-designation visitation	1.20 million (2019)	608,785 (2019)	Ocmulgee current: 112,071 (2025)
2023 visitation	1.71 million	729,096	Both increased after redesignation
Visitation change	43% (park-level, 2023 relative to 2019)	20% (2023 relative to 2019)	Literature average: ~21%
Annual visitor spending	\$86.1M (2023)	\$44.5M (2023)	Park-level local economic impact
Jobs supported	1,268 (three southern WV NPS sites, 2023)	595	Gateway community employment

Key lesson	Exceeded historical average; sustained lift four years post-designation	Actual outcomes consistent with pre-designation projections	Both provide credible analogs for Ocmulgee
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New River Gorge National Park and Preserve (Redesignated December 2020)

Prior to redesignation, New River Gorge National Park and Preserve recorded approximately 1.20 million recreation visits in 2019 (NPS IRMA, 2026a) and \$47.4 million in visitor spending (Moore Capito, 2022). By 2023, annual visitation had increased to 1.71 million—an increase of approximately 43 percent (NPS IRMA, 2026a)—and those visitors generated \$86.1 million in visitor spending (West Virginia MetroNews, September 2024). Across the three interconnected southern West Virginia NPS units—New River Gorge, Gauley River, and Bluestone—visitors generated \$96.5 million in spending and supported 1,268 jobs in 2023 (NPS, 2024c).

This outcome exceeded the historical average for comparable redesignations. The case studies reviewed here suggest that parks entering redesignation with established visitor assets may experience stronger-than-average outcomes.

White Sands National Park (Redesignated December 2019)

White Sands was redesignated from National Monument to National Park in December 2019. According to NPS visitor spending effects reports, prior to redesignation, the park recorded approximately 608,785 recreation visits in 2019 and generated \$32.7 million in visitor spending in gateway communities. By 2023, visitation had increased to 729,096, with visitors contributing \$44.5 million in spending and supporting 595 jobs in the local economy.

These outcomes are broadly consistent with the expectations established in Headwaters Economics' pre-designation analysis. The report projected that redesignation would increase visitation by approximately 21 percent and generate an additional \$6.2–\$7.5 million in annual visitor spending, together with 84–107 additional jobs. Although the observed post-designation totals reflect multiple influences—including broader travel trends and economic conditions—they indicate that White Sands experienced sustained growth in visitation and visitor spending following redesignation.

White Sands is a particularly relevant example because it involves redesignating existing National Park Service (NPS) units with nationally significant cultural resources and established visitor bases. The consistency between the pre-designation analysis and subsequent observed outcomes provides additional confidence that comparable economic impact modeling can offer a reasonable indication of potential long-term effects.

Supporting Example: Gateway Arch National Park (Redesignated 2018)

Gateway Arch provides an additional example of the redesignation of an existing National Park Service unit. In 2018, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial was redesignated as Gateway Arch National Park, illustrating that National Park designation has been applied not only to natural landscapes but also to nationally significant cultural and historical resources. Following redesignation, the park recorded 2.1 million recreation visits in 2019 and 2.4 million visits in 2023 (NPS, 2024d), an increase of approximately 18 percent.

III. Our Understanding of the Ocmulgee Mounds National Park Proposal

Ocmulgee Mounds enters the redesignation process with many of the characteristics already associated with successful National Park destinations. H.R. 9416 would build upon an established NPS unit with nationally significant cultural resources, existing visitor facilities, outdoor recreation opportunities, and broad regional support—rather than requiring the development of new visitor infrastructure from the ground up.

The Park and Its Characteristics

Located on the east bank of the Ocmulgee River in Macon, Georgia, the 3,336-acre Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park sits along the Fall Line between the Piedmont and the Atlantic Coastal Plain—a geographically significant transition zone that has shaped human settlement for thousands of years. The park preserves approximately 12,000 years of continuous human occupation and was the site of one of the largest archaeological investigations in North American history, resulting in the recovery of approximately 2.5 million artifacts during excavations conducted in the 1930s (National Park Service, 2024a).

Key visitor assets include:

- Seven prehistoric earthworks, including the 55-foot Great Temple Mound, constructed by Mississippian peoples beginning around 900 CE.
- A reconstructed prehistoric Earth Lodge built over an original clay floor dating to approximately 1015 CE, offering visitors access to one of the park's most distinctive ceremonial structures (Explore Georgia, n.d.).
- The site of a seventeenth-century Muscogee village and a 1690 British colonial trading post.
- The Ocmulgee River corridor, supporting hiking, paddling, fishing, hunting, and bird-watching within one of the largest remaining blocks of forested habitat in Georgia's Upper Coastal Plain (Georgia Conservancy, 2019).

The site holds deep cultural significance for the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, which identifies Ocmulgee as "the place where we first sat down" following their ancestors' migration (Explore Georgia, n.d.). The Muscogee (Creek) Nation identifies Ocmulgee as its ancestral homeland and has acquired significant acreage surrounding the park. The Nation's enduring connection to the site contributes an important Indigenous perspective that further differentiates Ocmulgee from many other National Park destinations.

Legislative History and H.R. 9416

We understand the effort to establish a national park at Ocmulgee has bipartisan roots extending back to 1934. Recent milestones include:

- 2019: The John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act expanded the park by approximately 2,100 acres and redesignated it from monument to historical park (Congress.gov, S.47, 2019).
- 2022: 906 acres were transferred to the National Park Service on February 9, 2022, following negotiations led by the Open Space Institute that halted incompatible industrial development adjacent to the park (National Park Service, 2022).
- 2024–2025: Both House (H.R. 9416, Rep. Austin Scott) and Senate (S. 1131, Sens. Ossoff and Warnock) versions of the redesignation act were introduced with bipartisan support. The Senate version passed out of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee in November 2024 (Ossoff, 2025).

- The proposal envisions a park integrating the existing historical park, Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, and additional lands along the Ocmulgee River corridor (S. 1131, 119th Congress).

Site-specific economic analysis supports the broader findings of the literature and provides a quantitative benchmark for the potential regional impacts of redesignation.

Prior Economic Analysis: “Diamond in the Rough” (NPCA / University of Tennessee, 2017)

We understand there is a previous study commissioned by the National Parks Conservation Association and conducted by economists at the University of Tennessee, this analysis projected that consolidating public lands along the Ocmulgee River corridor into a unified National Park and Preserve could increase annual visitation from approximately 200,000, the baseline used in the 2017 study, to 1.4 million over 15 years. The projected economic impacts include:

- An estimated \$206.7 million in additional annual economic activity for Middle Georgia
- \$76.5 million in additional annual labor income and \$29.8 million in new annual tax revenue
- More than 2,800 additional jobs—approximately 18 times the number then supported by the Ocmulgee National Monument

The study has been cited across multiple Congressional hearings. In November 2024 testimony before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands, Rep. Bishop cited the NPCA analysis projecting more than \$34 million in annual tax revenue and over 3,000 tourism-related jobs (Bishop, 2024; Clark, 2024). The study projections were based on a 2017 baseline of approximately 200,000 annual visitors and it anticipated a six-fold increase in visitation with National Park designation to annual visitation of approximately 1.4 million. Even a more moderate impact with National Park designation would bring substantial economic benefits over time.

A Macon-Bibb County hotel occupation tax, taking effect in January 2026 and projected to generate approximately \$2.5 million annually, is structured to direct visitor-generated revenue toward tourism infrastructure without drawing on property taxes (WMAZ, 2025).

IV. Implications for Ocmulgee Mounds

The characteristics of Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park are consistent with those observed in sites that have generated sustained economic gains following National Park redesignation. The park already operates with an established NPS visitor infrastructure, a nationally significant cultural and archaeological resource base, recreational assets along the Ocmulgee River corridor, and an active destination marketing organization in Visit Macon. Taken together, these factors position Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park favorably relative to the sites examined in the literature and the case studies.

Visitor Base and Growth Potential

The current 2025 annual visitation of approximately 112,000 at Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park (NPS IRMA, 2026b) is modest relative to comparable NPS units, which means the park has quantifiable room for growth as national awareness expands. The case studies reviewed here suggest that parks entering the proposed redesignation process with established visitor assets may experience stronger-than-average outcomes. Even a moderate impact with National Park designation would bring substantial economic benefits over time.

Economic Activity in Macon and Middle Georgia

Applying the NPS Visitor Spending Effects framework to projected visitor growth, the economic implications for the region are material:

- Lodging, food service, retail, and recreation businesses in Macon and surrounding communities are the primary beneficiaries of increased park visitation—the pattern the NPS VSE series consistently documents across the National Park System.
- Visit Macon’s existing marketing infrastructure positions the region to convert designation-driven national awareness into bookings. Headwaters Economics identifies active local promotion as a key determinant of how much economic benefit a proposed redesignation produces.
- A Macon-Bibb County hotel occupation tax, effective January 2026 and projected at approximately \$2.5 million annually, is structured to direct visitor-generated revenue toward tourism infrastructure without drawing on property taxes—linking visitor growth directly to public investment capacity (WMAZ, 2025).
- The site's Indigenous cultural narrative, together with the Muscogee (Creek) Nation's longstanding connection to the area and ownership of significant surrounding acreage, may encourage longer visitor stays and higher per-trip spending by offering a distinctive visitor experience.

Conclusion

The available evidence indicates that National Park designation produces documented increases in visitation and local economic activity. The academic literature identifies a clear relationship between designation and visitor demand; two recent redesignations confirm that these effects materialize in practice, with White Sands recording visitation growth broadly consistent with the projected 21 percent increase (Headwaters Economics, 2018) and New River Gorge sustaining approximately 40 percent growth above pre-designation levels (West Virginia MetroNews, 2024).

The characteristics of Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park—nationally significant cultural resources, established visitor facilities, recreational assets, and strong regional tourism support—are consistent with those observed in successful redesignations.

The evidence indicates that the proposed redesignation under H.R. 9416 is likely to increase visitor spending, support employment, and contribute to long-term economic growth in Macon, Bibb County, and Middle Georgia.

About Tourism Economics

Tourism Economics, an Oxford Economics company, is a leading global economic forecaster specializing in the intersection of tourism expertise and rigorous economics. We help organizations measure the value of the visitor economy, connect strategy and marketing to real-world outcomes, and forecast demand for future planning. Our work spans custom consulting and impact studies, decision-ready intelligence and attribution tools, and the industry’s most comprehensive travel forecasts and datasets.

Hundreds of leading companies, associations, and destinations around the world partner with Tourism Economics every year, trusting our experts to deliver clear, defensible insights. We bring decades of experience to every engagement, helping our clients make better marketing, investment, and policy decisions.

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