

Written Testimony of Dr. Kyle Cunningham

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Before the Committee on Natural Resources

U.S. House of Representatives

**Regarding the Proposed Conveyance of the Crossett Experimental Forest
from the United States Forest Service to the State of Arkansas**

August 28, 2026

Introduction and request

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to submit this written statement of support for Congressman Westerman's bill H.R. 10136 for the conveyance of Crossett Experimental Forest to the State of Arkansas. I am Dr. Kyle Cunningham, State Forester and Director of the Forestry Division of the Arkansas Department of Agriculture. The Department protects Arkansas's forests from wildland fire and natural hazards, advances forest health and productivity, and holds and manages the state forest system on behalf of Arkansans.

Arkansas asks the Committee to authorize conveyance of the Crossett Experimental Forest, approximately 1,680 acres in Ashley County, Arkansas, to the State of Arkansas. On conveyance, the Department will name, designate, and manage the property as Crossett State Forest under Ark. Code Ann. § 22-5-501.

The State makes three commitments with that request:

1. The Department will manage the property as a working demonstration forest and will continue to host the field days, tours, and professional training that have been conducted there since at least the 1950s.
2. The Department and the College of Forestry, Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Arkansas at Monticello (CFANR at UA Monticello) will develop and maintain a memorandum of understanding to promote, support and conduct continued forest research at the property.
3. The property will remain a wildlife management area under agreement with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.

Ashley County lies in Arkansas's Fourth Congressional District. The Department's local forestry field staff are based at the Crossett Experimental Forest Headquarters, and the College of Forestry, Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Arkansas at Monticello sits roughly 30 miles from the forest.

What the Crossett Experimental Forest is

The Crossett Lumber Company donated 1,680 acres in Ashley County to the Southern Forest Experiment Station in 1934, and the Forest Service established the Crossett Experimental Forest there. It was the first field station in the Southern Forest Experiment Station and the first Forest Service branch research station in the South. The assignment was practical. Southern Arkansas and northern Louisiana had been logged over by 1930, and the question was whether cutover loblolly and shortleaf pine stands could be rehabilitated while still returning something to the landowner.

The answer that came out of Crossett is why the property matters. Forest Service researchers there have published more than 1,000 articles on forest management and silviculture, and more than 45,000 foresters, students, landowners, and university staff have visited the forest on tours. Between 1979 and 2005 alone, scientists at the forest authored 432 publications totaling 5,903 pages, 151 of them in refereed journals. That body of work is the core of what the profession knows about managing naturally regenerated loblolly and shortleaf pine by even-aged and uneven-aged methods in the West Gulf region.

The physical layout is part of the asset. The 1,680 acres are divided into 42 contiguous compartments of about 40 acres each, six from east to west and seven from north to south, separated by fire protection lanes and served by a road network reaching at least one side of every compartment. Dr. James Guldin of the Southern Research Station wrote that this arrangement "promotes operations and access on a compartment basis, allows comparisons to be made among compartments, and simplifies administration, management, experimentation, and science delivery." A visitor can walk from one silvicultural treatment to a contrasting one in a few minutes, which is why the property became a teaching forest as well as a research forest.

Three other features on the ground deserve the Committee's attention. The 80-acre Reynolds Natural Area has received little human intervention since the forest was established in 1934. Three buildings the Civilian Conservation Corps constructed in 1939 and 1940 survive at the main complex off Arkansas Highway 133, and all three are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The forest is also home to the Southern Pine Module of the Forest Service National Advanced Silviculture Program, the course that certifies federal employees to approve silvicultural prescriptions on federal lands.

Arkansas has the authority and the record to take this on

The State does not need new authority to receive or manage this property. Arkansas Code Annotated § 22-5-501(a) authorizes the State to acquire and hold title to lands chiefly valuable for “the production of forest crops, watershed protection, erosion and flood control, forestation, reforestation, and recreation,” and subsection (b) requires that lands so acquired “shall be appropriately named, designated, administered, protected, and developed as state forests.” Section 22-5-502(a) permits acquisition “by gift, devise, purchase, or exchange from any county, municipality, state or federal agency or department.” Section 22-5-507(a) directs the State to cooperate fully with agencies of the United States Government and “to accept all funds and lands that may be available.” Section 22-5-508(a) places on the State Forester the duty to “manage, control, protect, develop, utilize, and handle the lands in the state forests in such a manner as to best serve the greatest permanent advantage to the people of this state.” Every one of those provisions is in force today.

Arkansas has run this arrangement before, at much larger scale. Poison Springs State Forest began in 1957 with the purchase of approximately 19,400 acres of abandoned farmland from the United States Department of Agriculture. It now covers 24,090 acres in western Ouachita and eastern Nevada counties, and the Department manages it for demonstration of good forest management practices, timber production, recreation, water quality protection, research, and wildlife habitat. The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission has designated it a wildlife management area, and the Department issues more than 350 camping permits there each year across more than 90 primitive campsites.

The most recent example is a year old. Hot Springs State Forest in Garland County comprises 3,307 forested acres assembled with support from the USDA Forest Service’s Forest Legacy Program and the Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources Council, one tract of which borders Hot Springs National Park. The Department and the Game and Fish Commission opened it as a wildlife management area in the fall of 2025. A federal-to-state forest conveyance, managed for research and demonstration and hunted under a Game and Fish Commission agreement, describes the model Arkansas already operates.

The three commitments

Research: a standing memorandum of understanding with UA Monticello

On May 6, 2026, Dean and Director Dr. Michael Blazier (CFANR at UA Monticello) and Dr. Cunningham, submitted a memorandum to Chairman Westerman setting out six research priorities for the property: silvicultural systems and stand management; forest health, pest, and disease monitoring; climate adaptation and resilience; genetics, seedling quality, and tree improvement; carbon sequestration and forest services; and remote sensing, inventory, and data modernization. That memorandum is the opening agenda for the memorandum of understanding. The work it describes is aimed at the market and management problems facing Arkansas’s private forest landowners, who hold the majority of the state’s more than 19 million acres of forestland.

One priority in that memorandum explains why this transfer has to preserve continuity rather than acreage alone. Crossett holds some of the longest-running records of naturally regenerated, uneven-aged loblolly pine management in the Southeast. The scientific value of those records is a function of their length, so the only way to protect them is to keep measuring them on schedule. Title without data continuity would leave the State holding the site and losing the science.

The partnership itself is not new. The Forest Service has administered the property from its office in Monticello for decades. Dr. Guldin records that the late Dr. R. Larry Willett, an extension forestry professional based at Monticello, organized field days, tours, short courses, and training sessions at the forest for roughly ten years beginning in the late 1980s, with a portion of his salary paid by the Forest Service, and he describes that assignment as “a model to be considered elsewhere.” A memorandum of understanding makes that model an institutional obligation instead of an arrangement that depends on one position staying funded.

Public access: the property stays a wildlife management area

The forest is Wildlife Management Area 136 in the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission’s system in Ashley County, and hunters use it today under a free permit issued from the forest headquarters. Under state ownership that designation continues by agreement between the Department and the Commission, on the same footing as Poison Springs and Hot Springs.

State ownership also resolves a friction the federal record identifies. Dr. Guldin writes that “the encroachment of non-research uses such as hunting or mountain-biking” is “a major challenge on some experimental forests and ranges,” addressed federally by requiring line officers on the research side and the management side of the agency to work together. Under state ownership one landowner holds both the research memorandum of understanding and the wildlife management area agreement, so a conflict between a research treatment and a hunting season is settled by one agency at the district level.

The strengths of a transition to state stewardship

The proposed conveyance is not a departure from Crossett’s research mission. It is a change in the public institution responsible for carrying that mission forward. The transition offers three practical strengths: stable public stewardship, greater adaptability as research questions change, and closer integration of research, extension, forest management, and wildlife administration.

Continuity is the first strength. In “Lessons from 72 years of monitoring a once-cut pine-hardwood stand on the Crossett Experimental Forest,” Forest Service scientists Don Bragg and Michael Shelton conclude that the primary lesson from long-term work at Crossett is the value of “programmatic continuity while retaining adaptability.” Measurements often acquire value that the original researchers could not have anticipated. The Reynolds Natural Area began as an unmanaged comparison with managed stands; its record now supports research on succession, biomass and carbon storage, dead wood, old-growth reference conditions, climate change, invasive species, and endangered red-cockaded woodpecker habitat.

The proposed structure protects that continuity through stable public ownership. Arkansas state forest ownership is public and statutory. Under Ark. Code Ann. § 22-5-501(b), land the State acquires for forest purposes must be administered as a state forest. The State has held Poison Springs continuously since 1957 in multiple-use management that includes research and demonstration. At Crossett, the memorandum of understanding with the University of Arkansas at Monticello and continued Forest Service research access will carry the measurement record through the change in title.

Adaptability is the second strength. Bragg and Shelton explain that experimental forests allow existing studies to be adapted to new questions and fresh research directions. At the Reynolds Natural Area, measurements first gathered to compare managed and unmanaged productivity later supported analysis of forest succession, biomass and carbon storage, dead wood, old-growth reference conditions, climate change, invasive species, and endangered species habitat. A state transition can protect that capacity by transferring study plans, plot data, measurement histories, and the archive with the land, while the university partnership keeps measurements on schedule and opens new lines of inquiry.

Their findings also show why a research forest benefits from coordinated management. In the Reynolds Natural Area, large, mature pines provide potential red-cockaded woodpecker nesting trees, but the dense hardwood understory and midstory that developed during decades of fire exclusion make the stand unsuitable for nesting. The authors identify prescribed fire and mechanical or chemical vegetation control as tools that managers increasingly use to retain open pine conditions. The transition can preserve the Reynolds Natural Area as the untreated research reference while allowing other compartments to demonstrate active, science-based habitat and forest management in coordination with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.

State stewardship also creates a clearer route from research to application. Dr. Guldin identifies federal constraints on retaining harvest proceeds for research, collecting program fees, and completing time-sensitive research treatments. Under Arkansas law, receipts and state forest management costs remain within the State Forestry Fund, while the memorandum of understanding can support field days, short courses, university research, and student training. The wildlife management area agreement keeps public access and wildlife objectives in the same operating framework. The result is a publicly owned forest positioned to keep long-term datasets intact, respond to emerging questions, train practitioners, and translate findings into management across Arkansas's predominantly private forest landscape.

What Arkansas asks of the Committee

Arkansas requests that legislation authorizing this conveyance address three points:

1. **Convey the land and improvements.** Authorize conveyance of the approximately 1,680 acres of the Crossett Experimental Forest in Ashley County to the State of Arkansas,

together with the improvements, including three buildings located on the headquarter grounds.

2. **Transfer the research record with the land.** Provide for transfer of study plans, plot data, measurement histories, and the study archive maintained at the forest. The measurement record is the property's principal scientific value and separating it from the land would defeat the purpose of the conveyance.
3. **US Forest Service Access.** USFS and the Southern Research Station will retain the authorization for access to existing studies as needed for any remaining data collection.

Conclusion

Ninety-two years of continuous measurement at Crossett produced management knowledge that Arkansas's private forest landowners rely on today, and the State intends to keep that record running. Arkansas has statutory authority under Ark. Code Ann. §§ 22-5-501 through 22-5-508, a 69-year record at Poison Springs and a new one at Hot Springs, a research partner 30 miles away in Monticello, and a wildlife agency already administering the property as a wildlife management area. The Department is prepared to accept this responsibility on the terms described above.

Thank you for your consideration. I would be pleased to answer questions or provide additional technical detail at the Committee's request.

Respectfully submitted,



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Arkansas Department of Agriculture

Sources

1. Guldin, J.M. 2009. *The Crossett Experimental Forest: 72 Years of Science Delivery in the Silviculture of Southern Pines*. In Ashton, S.F.; Hubbard, W.G.; Rauscher, H.M., eds. A Southern Region Conference on Technology Transfer and Extension. Gen. Tech. Rep. SRS-116. Asheville, NC: USDA Forest Service, Southern Research Station: 203-209.
2. Bragg, D.C.; Shelton, M.G. 2011. Lessons from 72 years of monitoring a once-cut pine-hardwood stand on the Crossett Experimental Forest, Arkansas, U.S.A. *Forest Ecology and Management* 261: 911-922. DOI: 10.1016/j.foreco.2009.12.021.
3. Memorandum, Dr. Kyle Cunningham and Dr. Michael Blazier to the Honorable Bruce Eugene Westerman, "Forestry Research Priorities for Crossett Forest," May 6, 2026.
4. Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, Crossett Experimental Forest WMA (Zone 136, Ashley County) and Hot Springs State Forest WMA (Zone 365, Garland County) area listings.
5. Arkansas Department of Agriculture, Poison Springs State Forest program page.
6. Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, "Hot Springs State Forest WMA offers new opportunities," September 17, 2025.
7. Ark. Code Ann. §§ 15-31-101, 15-31-108, 22-5-501, 22-5-502, 22-5-506, 22-5-507, and 22-5-508 (all active).