

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
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Before the Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives

Legislative Hearing on H.R. 2323, the Big Bend National Park Boundary Adjustment Act
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Chair Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, Chair Westerman, Ranking Member Huffman, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 2323, the Big Bend National Park Boundary Adjustment Act.

I am here on behalf of the Big Bend Conservancy, a nonprofit organization that has partnered with the National Park Service for 30 years to support Big Bend National Park. During that time, the Conservancy has provided more than \$5 million to the park through direct aid, projects, and endowments. The Terlingua Creek project represents one of our longest-running efforts to conserve important lands along the park's western boundary.

This effort is rooted in the wishes of private landowners who want to see their properties permanently conserved as part of Big Bend National Park. The Fulcher family, whose approximately 3,175-acre property represents the largest portion of the proposed addition, has worked with the Big Bend Conservancy toward that goal for the last [8] years, in order for the land to ultimately be transferred to the National Park Service. Other private landowners in the area have likewise expressed interest in having their properties included in the park, and the Conservancy has been working with those willing landowners to make their wishes possible. These are voluntary transactions composed entirely of donations or bargain sale purchases with the assistance of private philanthropy.

The land itself has a compelling connection to the Park. Terlingua Creek contains rare riparian habitat in an otherwise arid landscape, and the lands under consideration can help conserve stream segments upstream from the park. These properties also contain important cultural and paleontological resources. The project area includes evidence of Hispanic pioneer settlement, historic agricultural use, and other cultural resources, while the area adjacent to Rattlesnake Mountain contains significant fossil resources, including dinosaur remains and eggshells. It serves as a nesting area for Grey Hawks and Yellow-billed Cuckoos. These resources are directly related to the natural, geological, and cultural values for which Big Bend National Park was established.

I recognize that members of this Committee have legitimate concerns about expanding the federal estate and about the long-term costs of managing additional federal land. H.R. 2323 is an

unusually narrow case that addresses both concerns. The bill does not authorize the federal government to condemn private property. It permits the Secretary of the Interior to acquire the approximately 6,100 acres covered by the legislation only through donation or exchange, and it expressly prohibits eminent domain and condemnation. In other words, this is a voluntary boundary adjustment involving willing parties, at no cost to the taxpayer.

The Congressional Budget Office examined the Senate predecessor to this legislation, S. 1059. CBO estimated zero direct spending and, importantly, concluded that any costs incurred by the National Park Service to manage the additional land would be insignificant (\$0).

I ask that the Committee consider this proposal in the context of Texas. Texas is a private-land state: approximately 95 percent of the state is privately owned. Texas A&M's Natural Resources Institute describes that ownership pattern as fundamentally different from the public-land landscape found across much of the American West. The Big Bend Boundary Adjustment Act should therefore not be viewed as part of a broad effort to increase federal ownership in Texas. It is a limited boundary adjustment around an existing national park, supported by willing landowners and facilitated by a nonprofit that has already invested substantial private resources in making the transaction possible.

The new workforce housing benefit of this project also deserves the Committee's attention. The Conservancy has recently acquired one of the few parcels within the proposed boundary that contains two housing units. We are rehabilitating those structures with the intention of offering these buildings to the National Park Service for employee housing without adding to the existing deferred maintenance backlog. In a remote community where recruiting and retaining a park workforce is a persistent challenge, putting an existing residential structure to productive use is a practical way this boundary adjustment can support park operations without creating a significant new construction burden.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee to advance the Big Bend Boundary Adjustment Act.

This legislation respects private property rights, does not authorize condemnation, minimizes the federal financial burden, provides a practical opportunity for workforce housing, and protects important natural, cultural, and paleontological resources immediately adjacent to an existing national park. Most importantly, it offers Congress an opportunity to support a locally driven solution in which willing parties are voluntarily working to place important lands into public ownership for the benefit of the park and the American people.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I would be pleased to answer any questions.