

**Katherine Andrews**  
**Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism**  
**Thursday, June 27, 2024**  
**118th Congress**  
**Subcommittee on Federal Lands**  
**10:15 a.m. | 1334 Longworth House Office Building**

**In support of the Flatside Wilderness Additions Act, H.R. 3971.**

Good morning and thank you to my fellow Arkansans, Chairman Bruce Westerman and Congressman French Hill, and the entire committee for inviting me here today. My name is Katherine Andrews, and I serve as the Director of Arkansas' Office of Outdoor Recreation within the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism. I also chair the Confluence of States, a bipartisan group of outdoor recreation counterparts across the United States. It is a particular honor to appear before the Natural Resources Committee, and I am delighted to testify today in support of HR 397, the Flatside Wilderness Additions Act.

Arkansas is known as The Natural State for a reason – our pristine streams, unspoiled wilderness, and diverse outdoor recreation opportunities, including hiking, biking, floating and climbing. Our state boasts the Mountain Bike Capital of the World, the duck hunting capital of the world, and the trout capital of the USA, and we are rapidly becoming the climbing capital of the South. We have the world's longest bayou, the highest waterfall between the Rockies and the Appalachians, and the nation's first national river, the Buffalo National River. Additionally, Arkansas is the only state where you can hunt both elk and alligator. Our mission at the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism is to protect and promote the state's natural, cultural and historical resources, contributing to a thriving economy and enhanced quality of life.

There are numerous benefits associated with areas rich in outdoor recreation, such as business attraction, workforce retention, public health and wellness, getting kids outside and off screens and the conservation and preservation of our natural assets. In addition, a robust outdoor recreation industry is not just a luxury; it is essential and highly impactful. In 2022, 4.3 million visitors spent an estimated \$278 million in local gateway regions while visiting National Park Service lands in Arkansas. These expenditures supported 3,900 jobs, \$107 million in labor income, \$191 million in value added, and \$362 million in economic output for the Arkansas economy. Visitors and citizens alike flock to places where they can spend time outside.

Arkansas Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders has prioritized improving outdoor experiences, and I along with the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism are working tirelessly to create outdoor recreation opportunities from our incredible State Parks to communities across the state. Through Executive Order, The Natural State Initiative has adopted a bold approach, involving multiagency and private partners working together to break down silos and invite

innovation into our work and public lands. Access to outdoor recreation inspires generations of Arkansans to care for and champion the future of our natural places, ensuring that we remain The Natural State.

Our office serves two main groups: industry and community partners. For industry partners like bike shops, boat manufacturers, and outfitters, we provide resources and help overcome growth barriers. For community partners such as towns and advocacy groups, we highlight the economic benefits of outdoor recreation and assist in securing grants and funding to enhance their natural assets and infrastructure to attract visitors and outdoor enthusiasts.

Our mission is to conserve Arkansas' strongest resource, our natural assets, and the proposed legislation leads us toward the goal of strengthening the place we call home while sculpting future generations' love for the outdoors.

This brings me to the reason I am here today. I am here to offer the Arkansas Office of Outdoor Recreation's support of Congressman Hill's legislation, which would designate approximately 2,200 acres as wilderness and add it to the Flatside Wilderness area, part of the Ouachita National Forest. The Flatside Wilderness Additions Act represents the second and final phase to expand the wilderness area at Flatside. The surrounding land is either part of the Ouachita National Forest and unsuitable for wilderness designation, or privately owned.

The addition to the Flatside Wilderness will be a tremendous benefit to central Arkansas, providing a fantastic destination for hiking, camping, fishing and other outdoor activities. This addition will serve as a cherished outdoor haven, enriching the quality of life for Arkansans and attracting nature enthusiasts from far and wide.

As the population of Arkansas grows, the need to expand outdoor access becomes crucial. Increased access to outdoor spaces fuels the outdoor economy by encouraging activities like buying hunting and fishing licenses, hiring guide services and purchasing outdoor gear. Additionally, fostering a larger community dedicated to conservation ensures that these places and many others will remain protected.

This legislation will open numerous opportunities for young families and new residents while providing seasoned residents with joy and adventure in a cherished location. It will also offer access to the rugged Ouachita Mountains and clear streams, providing hiking and other recreational opportunities for all. On behalf of the Office of Outdoor Recreation and the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism, we support this proposed legislation and ask for your support as well.

Thank you for having me here today.