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Oral Testimony on H.R. 8182 to be given in the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands Legislative Hearing on November 19, 2024 at 2:00 PM

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I'm Seth Clark, and it is the honor of my life to have been elected Mayor Pro Tempore of Macon, Georgia and to serve as the Executive Director of the Ocmulgee National Park and Preserve Initiative, the non-tribal + tribal partnership working on conservation-based economic development in middle Georgia.

Today's hearing is the culmination of almost a century of civic efforts to designate the first and only National Park and Preserve in Georgia. The efforts began in 1934, when similar legislation that is before you today was proposed. After a century of successful public and private conservation and the leveraging of tens of millions of private and philanthropic dollars, it is our contention that we have met and exceeded Congressional and Departmental expectations in laying a foundation worthy of the designation we have sought for 90 years. In short, we have done our part, invested our private resources and are prepared to continue to do so. We are ready.

Over the course of the 20th Century Middle Georgians' have argued the unique ecological and cultural assets of the region are invaluable to our identity, the identity of our state, and that of the United States. We've leveraged these assets as means of responsible economic development through private and public conservation, resulting in increased access to, and the protection of irreplaceable cultural assets, pristinely managed hunting and fishing land and wildlife habitat, and a burgeoning cultural and outdoor-recreation based economy.

The coalition of advocates who support this legislation is much broader than the traditional environmental based groups I imagine this committee has become accustomed to hearing. Our partners include an overwhelmingly bipartisan and bicameral contingent of legislative authors, the Macon and Georgia Chambers of Commerce, the sovereign nations that constitute the InterTribal Council of removed, southeastern Tribes: the Muscogee (Creek), Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole Nations of Oklahoma, Active and Civilian leadership of Robins Air Force Base, all 20 municipalities that make up the Middle Georgia Regional Commission, the

state Department of Natural Resources, national and local conservation organizations and the Georgia Mining Association.

A recent economic study concluded that Congressional redesignation could eventually result in an additional 1.3 million visitors to middle Georgia annually. This could result in roughly 233 million dollars in additional annual private sector economic activity, spurring roughly 34 million dollars in additional annual tax revenue, and the creation of as many as 3,100 new private sector jobs.

And due to the generosity of John S. and James L. Knight foundation, we are currently conducting a regional strategic plan to ensure the realization of those projections. We are already seeing effects from our efforts. Recent visitation increases have played a vital role in Macon rolling back property taxes by 50%. You see, our tax portfolio is designed to require a roll back of our residents' property taxes on pace with increased revenue from visitation. This congressional re-designation will continue to result in the ongoing largest property tax cut in middle Georgia history.

It would also bolster our region's toughest economic engine and one of our country's most vital installations in the pursuit of our National Security, Robins Air Force Base. Their recent sustainability plan conducted by the Department of Defense recommended the passage of this legislation stating, "*the creation of a new national park and preserve adjacent to or near the Installation could protect lands neighboring the Installation, prevent encroachment, and preserve Installation operational areas and neighboring land use compatibility."*

Further, in the pursuit of responsible wildlife habitat and species management, this legislation constitutes one of the largest expansions of hunting and fishing access in middle Georgia in my lifetime, while reasonably and effectively protecting the private property rights of middle Georgians.

Lastly, and most importantly, I'd like to express gratitude to the Muscogee (Creek) Nation for their partnership in this effort. Ocmulgee is a mother ground of their ancestral homelands, of which they were forcibly dispossessed. The Ocmulgee corridor shows evidence of roughly 17,000 years of continuous human habitation - some of the longest in the continental United States. This partnership middle Georgia enjoys with the Muscogee (Creek) Nation has given our region a path toward reconciliation. And the opportunity of shared stewardship is one fully supported by our community and deeply important to our region's identity.

As we have for generations, we stand fully prepared to further marshal private philanthropic resources to support the National Park Service in the stewardship of what the Department of Interior has deemed some of the most nationally significant land in the United States. We just need your permission to do so. And it is for that, we humbly ask.

Thank you. And I’m happy to answer any questions.