

Ouachita River Valley Association

Serving Arkansas and Louisiana

STATEMENT OF THE OUACHITA RIVER VALLEY ASSOCIATION
PRESENTED TO THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER COMMISSION
GREENVILLE, MISSISSIPPI
26 August 2020

General Holland and Members of the Mississippi River Commission:

I am David Weeks, Executive Director of the Ouachita River Valley Association (ORVA). It is an honor and privilege to present this statement on behalf of our Association.

The Association has been in existence for more than 127 years and has a proud record of longevity, achievement, and service. Organized in 1893 as the Ouachita River Improvement Association, its sole purpose was to obtain year-round commercial navigation on the Ouachita River in Arkansas and Louisiana.

In 1950, this nonprofit organization was renamed the Ouachita River Valley Association. Operating within two distinct areas, the upper Ouachita River Basin primarily within the State of Arkansas (20 counties) and the lower Ouachita River Basin, primarily representing Louisiana (17 parishes), it represents the private sector of the economy and serves as an advocate for individuals and organizations, public and private, that comprise the constituency of these communities. The Association is governed by a Board of Directors consisting of three officers and seven directors from each state.

The major focus of our Association is on the operation, maintenance, and completion of the Ouachita-Black Rivers Navigation Project and associated infrastructure. However, it also greatly supports the economic development of projects throughout the Ouachita River Basin.

Our comments in this statement outline ORVA's major focus areas, interests, and concerns and follow this general outline:

- Navigation
- Water Supply – Municipal, Commercial, and Agricultural
- Recreation and Conservation
- Wastewater Discharge
- Flood Damage Reduction

The intent of the Ouachita-Black Rivers Navigation Project is to provide year-round commercial navigation which extends from the mouth of the Black River to Camden, Arkansas, a distance of some 330 river miles. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers currently maintains four locks and dams on the Ouachita River, each having a lock

chamber of 84 feet wide and 600 feet in length. The navigation channel is maintained to a nine-foot navigation channel and a 100-foot width to accommodate barge traffic.

An estimate of annual needs for the Project is roughly \$10.7M in Operations and Maintenance, which has no inflationary adjustment. This conservative estimate represents the minimum annual requirement for the current project.

- \$3.3M for Dredging
- \$1.6M routine Maintenance of the waterway
- \$4M for lock operations
- \$1.8M for recreation

The President's Budget for the Ouachita-Black Rivers Navigation Project has tracked a downward trend over the past several years. Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 funding was \$8.1M. Initial FY 2017 funding represented \$8.4M. Thanks to Congressional support, an additional \$2M was added in FY 2017 for dredging operations. No doubt based on the previous fiscal year, FY 2018 funding amounted to \$10.5M. Fiscal Year 2019 totaled \$7.9M, and FY 2020 amounted to \$7.3M. While no funds were appropriated in the President's Budget or Work Plan for FY 2020, the Association is greatly appreciative of the \$2.3M for dredging in the FY 2020 Supplemental. As of the date of this Statement, the dredge Allison Crosby is currently at work near Mile 44 on the waterway. The President's Budget for FY 2021 currently projects funding slightly higher at \$7.6M with none earmarked for dredging.

The Association greatly appreciates the Commission's continued efforts to express capability for dredging, maintenance, lock operations, and recreation for the Project. Like compounded interest, however, backlog maintenance (currently estimated at more than \$10M) continues to grow with each successive budget year.

We understand the Corps' reduction in hours of operation for the locks and dams due to the declining tonnage on the river. We also understand the correlation between dredging dollars and declining tonnage (shipping) on the river. However, with minimum (or no) dredging, barge traffic is sometimes stopped or halted due to barge damage or grounding. As we've indicated above, the President's Budget for FY 2021 has no dredging dollars earmarked for the Project. This represents little enticement for potential shippers and greatly affects the economic picture of the area.

The Ouachita-Black Rivers once enjoyed a 24-hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days per year operation as directed by law. Felsenthal and Thatcher are currently open only 10 hours a day, five days per week. The Association's position is that the Project should be operated as authorized at a full level of service. Limited hours of lock operation may lead to delays which drive up the cost of shipping, again offering limited enticement for potential shippers.

The Association believes it highly critical and therefore fully supports ongoing legislation to add water supply to the language of the Water Resources and Development Act.

The Project provides a dependable source of water for municipal, industrial, and agricultural use along its entire length and is becoming an increasingly important component of the River. Several municipalities depend on the Ouachita to provide water supply to residents, to include Monroe and Sterlington, Louisiana and Camden, Arkansas.

Along with municipal water supply is industrial water supply for multiple firms within the Ouachita River Valley. These users also depend on maintaining an adequate pool depth to sustain operations. Union County, Arkansas, for example has a 65 million gallon-per-day capacity intake and industrial water treatment plant on the Ouachita. Completed in 2003, the infrastructure serves the largest electric generating plant in Arkansas, and irrigates a golf and residential community, the grounds of El Dorado High School and a private citizen's recreation area.

Industries and irrigation customers use Ouachita River water as an alternative to the once threatened and rapidly declining Sparta groundwater aquifer, which until 2003 was Union County's only source of drinking and industrial water. In 1997, Union county was using 21 Million Gallons per Day (mgd) of Sparta aquifer groundwater. Today, Union County uses 15-18 mgd of Ouachita River water and 7-8 mgd of Sparta aquifer groundwater. In response, the aquifer, which in 1997 was declining as much as 7 feet per year in parts of Union County, has risen 100 feet as of April 2020.

These Union County, Arkansas' industries and others are highly dependent on the level of the river, and as we discuss below, locks and dams sustain in that level. With a drop in river levels, production at these facilities would be at substantial risk. In fact, Union County, Arkansas' electric generating plant has no other source of water and one of Union County's three industries was able to expand only because of the abundant source of surface water available from the Ouachita River.

Irrigation for agricultural use continues to grow as an evolving use of the river. Thousands of acres of agricultural fields, primarily those areas south of Monroe, Louisiana, are becoming more and more dependent upon Ouachita water for irrigation. Irrigation, as you are aware, greatly increases the value of the agricultural commodity product at harvest.

The Association greatly supports the Corps' recreational areas along the Ouachita-Black Rivers and its tributaries. Combined with other recreational areas managed by state, local, and private entities, visitors provide a huge economic impact to the communities within the Ouachita River Basin. The three Corps lakes: Ouachita, DeGray, and Greeson, are an integral part of the Hot Springs community and economic system, and a huge component of Arkansas' tourism product. To fully support the necessary backlog maintenance of these Corps lakes, additional resources are needed. Fiscal Year 21 capability is estimated at \$46M.

Construction of the Lake DeGray Field Office (the last remaining facility to be replaced at the Vicksburg Districts Arkansas Lake Projects) and Interpretive Visitor Center is

greatly needed. This project, for one reason or another, has been backlogged for more than ten years. Construction of this field office (with conservative estimates of between \$4.8-5M), combined with upgrades to the Corps campgrounds, is an important investment that will pay huge dividends and add to the economic well-being to the people of Arkansas.

Wastewater discharge is a fact of everyday life. Several key factors play a role in this process: namely volume and flow, which aid in the dilution of wastewater. Although nature plays the primary role, the level of the river (and its flow) can be controlled by the Corps' locks and dams. Should the locks and dams not be maintained (i.e., water levels not adequately maintained), the amount of water treatment will require a greater capital expenditure from entities and businesses, equating to greater costs for area residents. The cost of maintenance, therefore, is often overlooked with far reaching second and third order effects.

Flood damage reduction is of paramount importance to ORVA. The Ouachita River levee system is closely associated with navigation, especially south of Monroe, Louisiana, as it provides flood damage reduction. We are greatly concerned with bank caving and other erosion problems on the Ouachita and Black Rivers in multiple areas. We are pleased with the approval to repair multiple bank caving sites through the PL 84-99 program.

The Water Resources and Development Act (WRDA) of 2007 included language restoring 43 miles of the upper east bank, 1.9 miles of floodwall in Monroe, Louisiana, and 7.2 miles of levee on the west bank of the Ouachita River Levees Project as part of the Mississippi River and Tributaries (MR&T) Project. The WRDA 2007, however, did not reinstate the lower 63 miles of the east bank from Monroe south where the majority of erosion and damage occurs. The Association provided draft comments to the legislation, namely the modification of the MR&T Project to include the portion of the Ouachita River Levee System at and below Monroe, Louisiana, to Caldwell Parish, Louisiana. The Association believes there is an increased possibility for levee system failure which will lead to potentially catastrophic results

The Ouachita River contributes substantially to the growth and economic development of the entire Ouachita River Basin with nearly \$5.7B in annual economic activity, with commercial use returning roughly \$1.2B in income to households in Arkansas and Louisiana. Additionally, all commercial use of the river is linked to nearly 21,000 full-time jobs for Arkansas and Louisiana residents. The Project is more important than ever to the welfare and economic success of the Basin.

In summary, the Association's major concerns are:

- Lack of funds for dredging and backlog maintenance, to include the three Corps lakes
- Adding water supply as a feature of the Navigation Project
- Modifying the Project to add bank stabilization as a Project feature

- Placing the lower 63 miles of the east bank of the Ouachita River levee to the MR&T Project
- Construction of a new Lake DeGray Field Office and Interpretive Visitor Center

Thank you for the opportunity to present this statement to the Commission. We also thank the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, specifically the Vicksburg District, for their professional and working relationship with the Association. We look forward to a continuance of this great relationship as we work together to further the development of water and land resources projects which greatly support the people and communities of Arkansas and Louisiana.

Sincerely and respectfully,

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