



**STATEMENT OF THE OUACHITA RIVER VALLEY ASSOCIATION
PRESENTED TO THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER COMMISSION
GREENVILLE, MISSISSIPPI
APRIL 6, 2022**

General Holland and Members of the Mississippi River Commission:

Thank you for the opportunity and privilege to present this statement and address ORVA's major needs and concerns on behalf of the members of the Association.

The Ouachita River Valley Association has been in existence for more than 128 years and has a proud record of past achievements and longevity. We represent the private sector of the economy involved in the development of water and land resources in the Ouachita River Valley. We operate in the States of Arkansas and Louisiana and are governed by a Board of Directors consisting of three officers and seven directors from each state.

At its inception in 1893, the sole purpose of the non-profit Association was to obtain a year-round commercial navigation system on the Ouachita River in Arkansas and Louisiana. Today, while the major focus of ORVA is on operation, maintenance, and completion of the Ouachita-Black Rivers Navigation Project and associated infrastructure, the Association also supports economic development projects throughout the Basin.

The mission of our Association is to promote the development of water and land resources projects that are engineered and economically feasible, environmentally sustainable, and publicly acceptable that enhance the general welfare of the people in the Ouachita River Basin in Arkansas, Louisiana, and the Nation. Our major interests include navigation, water supply (commercial, industrial, and agricultural), recreation and conservation, waste water discharge, flood damage reduction, and economic development.

The Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 funding for the Ouachita-Black Rivers Navigation Project is \$12.065M for Operations and Maintenance. Considering FY 2021 funding was a total of \$7.625M, the funding picture for the Project is the best it has been in most recent memory. For years, the Association has estimated the annual requirement for the Project (with no adjustments for inflation) to be \$10.7M in Operations and Maintenance. This estimate is projected as \$3.3M for dredging, \$1.6M for routine maintenance, \$4M

for lock operations, and \$1.8M for recreation. And although the Project received a substantial increase in funding in FY 2022 over FY 2021 levels, it still faces a lack of funding for backlog maintenance which the Corps estimates at \$22M. The issue with the leak in the hinge crest gate at H.K. Thatcher Lock and Dam is only an example of a lack of maintenance for the Project over the years. The district reacted quickly this past fall to address the loss of pool at Thatcher which could have had dire consequences to the water intake at Camden Water Utilities (some 52 river miles away) which supports the City of Camden and most of Ouachita County.

The passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) in November 2021 added some relief to funding shortfalls. With the IIJA Spend Plan for O&M in FY 2022, Blakely Dam and Lake Ouachita will receive \$2.24M, DeGray Lake \$1.635M, and Narrows Dam/Lake Greeson \$2,211M. The Ouachita and Black Rivers will receive \$3.915M. The summary of the work for the Ouachita-Black includes replacing barriers at Moon Lake Recreation Area, silt removal from recreation areas, repair of H.K. Thatcher Lock and Dam hinge crest gate, and repair/replace Felsenthal Lock and Dam tainter gate.

A reinstatement of the 63 miles of the east bank of the Ouachita River levee (“at and below Monroe, Louisiana to Caldwell Parish, Louisiana”) into the Mississippi River and Tributaries (MR&T) Project has been a priority for ORVA. The Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) 2020 included language requiring a feasibility analysis prior to the inclusion of this relevant levee section into the MR&T Program. Looking back at previous WRDA legislation, WRDA 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 MR&T Project. The WRDA 2007, however, did not reinstate the lower 63 miles of the east bank south where the majority of erosion and damage occurs.

The Association believes that adding, or rather reinstating, the 63 miles of the east bank of the Ouachita River levee (“at and below Monroe, Louisiana to Caldwell Parish, Louisiana”) to the MR&T Project is critical. Like the restorations resulting from the 2007 language, it in simple terms places the portion of the levee system under federal authority (responsibility) for maintenance and repair. Flooding and high-water levels have substantially increased the possibility for system failure leading to potentially catastrophic results. Needless to say, this restoration is a plus for navigation and flood control for the people of the Ouachita River Basin.

The restoration of the lower 63 miles was presented and discussed at the MRC Low Water Meeting this past August and addressed in ORVA’s written Statement. In your written response to that statement dated October 22, 2021 you noted, “we continue to await implementation guidance from USACE on how to proceed in regard to generating a proposal regarding incorporation of the lower 63 miles of the Ouachita River Levee System as a part of the Mississippi River Tributary Project.”

For whatever reason, implementation guidance was never generated by Corps (USACE) headquarters and no feasibility analysis ever conducted. The end result is that the inclusion of the relevant levee section into the MR&T was most likely never considered in the massive Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) that provided billions of dollars in funding for USACE civil works projects. We believe the people of the Ouachita River Basin missed a golden opportunity!

Modifying the Project to add bank stabilization as a Project feature is another major concern of the Association. The Ouachita River levee system is closely associated with navigation, especially south of Monroe, Louisiana, as it provides flood damage reduction which is of paramount importance to ORVA. We are greatly concerned with bank caving and other erosion problems on the Ouachita and Black Rivers in multiple areas. That said, the Vicksburg District continues to support the Tensas Basin Levee District with multiple repairs along the Ouachita River levees as part of this emergency program. The Association is highly pleased with the planned and ongoing repairs at multiple bank caving sites through the PL 84-99 program.

Construction of a new Lake DeGray Field Office and Interpretive Visitor Center remains an ORVA major concern and another project area in which the Corps can make a tremendous difference. Considering the Corps significantly contributes to the economies of Arkansas and Louisiana by supporting the Project in the areas of tourism, recreation, and development, we do not understand why this construction has not been addressed. The Lake DeGray Field Office is the last remaining facility to be replaced at the Vicksburg Districts' Arkansas Lake Projects and has been backlogged for more than ten years. Conservatively estimated at between \$4.8-\$5M, this construction is sorely needed. It is not only important to the economic health of the community and critical for area visitors, but is also necessary for the safety and health of Corps employees.

The Ouachita is critically important to the area economy. In previous statements to the Commission, ORVA has demonstrated how the Ouachita-Black Rivers have impacted the economy of the region. In February 2021, the Environmental Protection Agency Report titled, "Deeper Look at the Ouachita River", details how the river serves as a center for navigation, recreation, economic development, drinking water, and community identity. In a single statement: its' economic value is high! The Association will continue to pursue all avenues of economic development within the basin.

Finally, there is a need to conduct a basin-wide comprehensive study to devise a plan for the development and conservation of water and land resources in Arkansas and Louisiana. A reconnaissance study would serve as a basis for both the Corps of Engineers and other agencies to examine current and future problems and needs related to flood damage reduction, navigation, water supply, bank stabilization, ecosystem restoration, and recreation. This effort would assess the extent of these problems and the federal interest in measures to address them. The Association believes there is a strong probability that several feasibility studies would result from the initial reconnaissance study, especially in the areas of navigation and flood damage reduction.

In summary, we ask for your support and assistance in addressing ORVA's major concerns:

- Increasing funding for backlog maintenance, to include the three Corps lakes
- Restoring the lower 63 miles of the Ouachita River east bank levee to the MR&T Project
- Modifying the Project to add bank stabilization as a Project feature
- Construction of a new Lake DeGray Field Office and Interpretive Visitor Center
- Supporting the economic development within the Ouachita River Basin
- Undertaking a comprehensive watershed study of the Ouachita River Basin

We are working closely with our Congressional members and are optimistic that some of what has been discussed could be authorized in some future version of WRDA or addressed at the Corps level.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this statement to the members of the Mississippi River Commission. We are proud of our relationship with the Commission and the Vicksburg District and proud to partner with the District on the Ouachita-Black Rivers Navigation Project. We look forward to the continued superb working relationship as we work together to further the development of water and land resources projects within the Ouachita River Basin.

Please contact me at david.weeks.ORVA@Outlook.com or 318-366-3834 (Mobile) if I can be of assistance or answer any questions. Again, thank you for the opportunity to submit a statement on behalf of the members of the Association.

Sincerely and respectfully,

David L. Weeks
Executive Director