

Ouachita River Valley Association

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Serving Arkansas and Louisiana

STATEMENT OF THE OUACHITA RIVER VALLEY ASSOCIATION PRESENTED TO THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER COMMISSION GREENVILLE, MISSISSIPPI 14 April 2021

General Holland and Members of the Mississippi River Commission:

Thank you for the opportunity to address the major concerns of the Ouachita River Valley Association (ORVA).

The Ouachita-Black Rivers Navigation Project continues to face a lack of funds for dredging and backlog maintenance, to include the three Corps lakes. The Association estimates the minimum annual requirement for the Ouachita-Black Rivers Project to be \$10.7M in Operations and Maintenance as reflected here:

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

Not only is funding for the Project at a standstill, Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 funding is 25% below the \$10.7M annual need. We respectfully ask for your support for full funding of the dredging and maintenance of the Project in the FY22 Budget. Full funding allows for improved maintenance and increased river capacity/usage. The Association greatly appreciates the Commission's continued support and its efforts to express capability for dredging, maintenance, lock operations, and recreation for the Project.

The President's annual budget is usually released mid-February but early indications are that it will be delayed until late Spring 2021. Hopefully, the delay will not signal another downward spiral in needed funding.

Concerning recreation, ORVA greatly supports the Commission's position and the Corps' funding for recreational areas along the Ouachita-Black Rivers and its tributaries. 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 and recreation product. Combined with other recreational areas managed by state, local, and private entities, this surge of visitors provides a huge economic impact to the communities within the Ouachita River Basin. The economic value associated with tourism and recreation alone at these Corps lakes is tremendous with more than one

million visitors annually. To fully support the necessary backlog maintenance of these Corps lakes, additional resources are needed. Fiscal Year 2021 capability is estimated at \$46M.

Congress passed the Water Resources and Development Act (WRDA) of 2020 which was signed into law by President Trump on December 27, 2020. The exciting news is that the Act modifies the Ouachita-Black Rivers Project for Navigation to include water supply as an authorized purpose. It also includes authorizing the Corps of Engineers to review and report on the inclusion of a portion of the Ouachita River Levee onto the Mississippi River & Tributaries (MR&T) Project.

For people within the Ouachita River Basin water supply is an extremely important and necessary feature of the Navigation Project. Water Supply has been a top priority for the Association and an increasingly important component of the river. The Project provides a dependable source of water for municipal, industrial, and agricultural use along its entire length; there are several success stories concerning water supply. Modification to include water supply as an authorized purpose of the Project is a victory for those communities within the Basin.

Contained within WRDA 2020 is language authorizing the Corps to review a project proposal and issue a report to Congress on whether the lower 63 miles of the Ouachita River Levee System at and below Monroe, Louisiana, to Caldwell Parish, Louisiana should be included in the MR&T Project. Looking back, 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 from Monroe south to the end of the east bank system. At one point, the 63 miles did, in fact, fall within the umbrella of the MR&T Program. Although the issue has been contentious for years, several historical and official documents do exist that reference that portion of the river as part of the MR&T Program. The goal of the Association, all along, has been to restore, or reinstate, the lower 63 miles where the majority of erosion and damage occurs.

Although the efforts undertaken by the PL 84-99 program are critically important to the repair and stabilization of the Ouachita riverbank, ORVA believes the inclusion of the lower 63 miles is paramount to the sustained protection of the levee system. Restoration of the lower 63 miles is an ORVA top priority, if not its highest priority. The inclusion of this part of the river not only provides the assurance of a necessary funding stream but alleviates ambiguities of responsibility for that segment of the Project in the future.

Modifying the Project to add bank stabilization as a Project feature is another focus area of the Association. 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 highly pleased with the planned and ongoing repairs at multiple bank caving sites through the PL 84-99 program.

As briefly mentioned above, the Corps significantly contributes to the economies of Arkansas and Louisiana by supporting the Project in the areas of tourism, recreation, and development. The upgrades and rehabilitation of campsites and facilities within the Ouachita River Basin (Lake Ouachita for example) have had tremendous results in increased attendance and economic surge within the area.

Construction of a new Lake DeGray Field Office and Interpretive Visitor Center is another project area in which the Corps can make a difference. This construction project is also a priority for the Association. The Lake DeGray Field Office is the last remaining facility to be replaced at the Vicksburg Districts' Arkansas Lake Projects. For one reason or another, the project has been backlogged for more than ten years. The project, conservatively estimated at between \$4.8-\$5M is sorely needed. Construction of this field office to include the construction of an Interpretive Visitor Center, 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.

In 2017, Professors Robert Eisenstadt and Paul Nelson, with the University of Louisiana at Monroe Center for Economic Research, published a study outlining the economic impact of the Ouachita-Black Rivers Navigation Project. The researchers examined direct/indirect and induced economic impact resulting from several different uses of the River, including: navigation; municipal water supply; industrial water supply; recreation; agriculture; and wastewater discharge.

The study finds that the Ouachita-Black Rivers' economic value to the region is high; commercial use of the river generates nearly \$5.7 billion annually and is linked to nearly 21,000 full-time jobs in Louisiana and Arkansas. Further, commercial activities have returned \$1.2 billion to households throughout the region. This is particularly important, as the report identifies the counties and parishes in the Lower Ouachita as depressed economic areas. It should be noted that the researchers warn that rescinded Federal funds could lead to unregulated flow, which would result in a drop in water levels. This would have an adverse impact on all the aforementioned uses of the Rivers (e.g., navigation, water intake for industrial processes, etc.), thus harming the economy of the entire region.

In late February 2021, the Environmental Protection Agency issued a report titled "Deeper Look at the Ouachita River." The report details how the Ouachita serves as a center for navigation, recreation, economic development, drinking water, and community identity. While the report focuses primarily on Ouachita Parish, Louisiana, much of the report can be applied to the Ouachita River Basin as a whole.

At its inception in 1893, the sole purpose of the 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 the economic development projects throughout the Basin. The River is a system of systems: navigation, recreation, water supply, fish and wildlife conservation, flood damage reduction, and wastewater discharge.

Although tonnage in recent years has slipped, as evidenced in the above-mentioned reports, 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
- Placing the lower 63 miles of the east bank of the Ouachita River 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

The Association greatly appreciates the opportunity to present this statement to the members of the Mississippi River 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 are proud to be considered a valued partner with the Vicksburg District. 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 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