

BUFFALO RIVER WATERSHED ALLIANCE

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BRWA Statement on a proposal for creating Buffalo River National Park and Preserve November, 2023

BRWA has been closely following recent developments concerning a proposal to re-brand the Buffalo National River as the Buffalo River National Park and Preserve.

We recognize that visitation is increasing with an average of 1.5 million annual visitors over the past 10 years. The issue we're discussing now, combined with recent large land acquisitions, are signs of coming changes that will undoubtedly increase visitation even more. Keeping things as-is is not an option. We need to be proactive and plan for those changes so we can protect the things we value most. That means having open and respectful conversations about a variety of ideas. Yes, including those being currently proposed for re-naming the river. Simply having a rational discussion of the topic does not mean agreeing with every point being proposed but could lead to solutions which are more broadly acceptable to the community.

It is encouraging to see that so many people with differing points of view agree on one thing - we need to preserve and protect the Buffalo. We may not all agree 100% on how best to do that but I can't believe that, if we work at it, we can't come up with solutions that are respectful of local culture, provide sustainable economic opportunities, and, most of all, protect the Buffalo for future generations

BRWA's mission is foremost to preserve and protect the scenic beauty and pristine water quality of the BNR. We recognize that steps must be taken to address increased usage of the river but, based on what we know at this point, the proposal is incompatible with our mission and we do not support it.

We have had numerous inquiries regarding our position. The devil is in the details and the details to date unfortunately are scant. We have reached out to schedule a meeting to better understand their proposal but so far nothing has materialized.

What we do know from reporting and from public statements is that a survey of voters in the BNR watershed has been conducted to assess public support for re-designating the river as a way to "preserve, enhance and drive economic impact for the Buffalo National River". We have seen the website for their proposal and we have followed numerous online discussions. Based on those few details, the following are some of our concerns:

- 1) **Funding.** Anyone who has visited the river during spring and early summer knows that crowds are increasing, along with human impacts. Erosion, traffic, trash and waste are only getting worse. The Park Service does not have the resources to adequately manage current visitor numbers. One of the goals of the

proposal is to raise the public visibility of the river as a National Park to attract even more visitors. National Park status does not in and of itself assure any additional funding compared to National River status. Any proposal to increase visitation must include a commitment from the Arkansas Congressional Delegation to secure additional federal funding for the Park Service to manage, control, and mitigate the impacts of increased visitation.

- 2) **Resource extraction.** Preserve status “may” allow extraction of minerals and fuels if they do not jeopardize natural values. Any proposal for re-designation must include a categorical exclusion by Congress of any such allowance for resource extraction.
- 3) **Land acquisition.** The survey raised the question of acquisition of additional lands. BRWA opposes any forced acquisition of private land.
- 4) **Watershed management.** The proposed project appears to be primarily a marketing tool to increase economic development of the surrounding area. BRWA does not support unbridled development within the watershed. Any project of this scale must include funding for each county in the watershed to develop and implement long-range plans to assure that development related to the river protects water quality and is controlled, appropriate, and sustainable. Otherwise we could see runaway development such as Pigeon Forge or Gatlinburg.
- 5) **Water quality.** Pristine water quality is the hallmark of the Buffalo National River. An increase in usage of the river as well as increased development within the watershed carries the very real danger of degradation of water quality. Any proposal for re-designation must include adequate funding for regular and ongoing water quality monitoring of the river and its tributaries, in addition to any monitoring currently being conducted.

We hope that answers to these and other concerns will be forthcoming. We will not support and will actively oppose any economic development proposals which do not include adequate safeguards to preserve and protect the Buffalo National River.