

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL A. CALDWELL, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, PARK PLANNING, FACILITIES AND LANDS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, CONCERNING S. 3542, A BILL TO AMEND THE ATCHAFALAYA NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA ACT TO MODIFY THE BOUNDARY OF THE ATCHAFALAYA NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

MAY 15, 2024

Chairman King, Ranking Member Daines, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Department of the Interior on S. 3542, a bill to amend the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area Act to modify the boundary of the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area (NHA), and for other purposes.

The Department recognizes that there could be potential benefits in expanding the Atchafalaya NHA, but recommends that the committee defer action on S. 3542 until such time as the National Park Service (NPS) determines if this proposed expansion is appropriate.

S. 3542 would expand the boundary of the Atchafalaya NHA to include Lafourche Parish and would add one member to the Atchafalaya Trace Commission. The NHA was authorized in 2006, to help preserve the local cuisine, music, traditions, language, and cultural landscapes of the Atchafalaya Basin in south central Louisiana. The area is among the most culturally rich and ecologically varied regions in the United States, home to the widely recognized Cajun culture as well as a diverse population of European, African, Caribbean and Native-American descent. The NHA includes a part of Jean Lafitte National Historical Park, Lake Fausse Pointe State Park, Cypremort Point State Park, a part of Natchez Trace Parkway and National Scenic Trail, and the Atchafalaya Water Heritage Trail. The Atchafalaya Trace Commission was authorized as the management entity of the NHA and is composed of 14 members appointed by the governing authority of each parish within the heritage area.

Prior to beginning any effort to designate an area as a national heritage area, the NPS recommends that a feasibility study be conducted to assess several factors, including: whether the landscape has an assemblage of natural, cultural, historic and scenic resources that, when linked together, tell a nationally important story; whether an organization exists with the financial and organizational capacity to coordinate heritage area activities; and, whether the level of support for designation exists within the region.

A 1998 special resource study found the Atchafalaya Basin to be an outstanding example of a natural resource, possessed exceptional value in illustrating and interpreting many key natural and cultural themes of our nation's heritage, and offered exceptional opportunities for recreation, public use and enjoyment, and scientific study. The NPS recommends that the Commission submit an addendum to the study that includes a boundary justification for the inclusion of Lafourche Parish. The addendum will document that the Commission has reached out to the affected communities and that there is public support for the inclusion of their parish in the

boundary of the NHA. Additionally, the addendum will ensure that the proposed inclusion of the parish supports the original intent of the NHA.

Once the Commission completes the study addendum, the NPS will undertake our evaluation as expeditiously as possible. The NPS recommends that the committee defer action on S. 3542 until the study addendum is completed and the NPS can make a determination on the proposed expansion.

Chairman King, this concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have.