

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. 4216, TO ESTABLISH THE OCMULGEE MOUNDS NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE IN THE STATE OF GEORGIA, 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 Department of the Interior's views on S.4216, a bill to establish the Ocmulgee Mounds National Park and Preserve in the State of Georgia, and for other purposes.

The Department supports the intent of S. 4216 to bring additional recognition, protection, and interpretation to the resources associated with the Ocmulgee Mounds and the Ocmulgee River Corridor but would like to work with the sponsor and the Committee on amendments that would improve the bill's implementation.

S. 4216 would redesignate Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park as Ocmulgee Mounds National Park and authorize the establishment of Ocmulgee Mounds National Preserve, subject to the acquisition of sufficient land to constitute a manageable park unit. The two components would collectively be designated as a single NPS unit called "Ocmulgee Mounds National Park and Preserve". Included in the boundary of the preserve would be the Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, which would continue to be administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). The bill would direct the Secretary of the Interior to enter into an agreement with the Muscogee (Creek) Nation to provide for the co-management of the park and preserve after receiving recommendations for that purpose from an Advisory Council that would be authorized to be established by the bill. The bill contains several other provisions.

The area proposed to be included in Ocmulgee Mounds National Park and Preserve would encompass traditional homelands of the Muscogee and other Indigenous peoples, numerous nationally significant archeological sites, diverse wildlife and vegetation communities, and provide expansive recreation and visitor opportunities. Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park, situated approximately three miles east of downtown Macon, Georgia, commemorates over 12,000 years of human habitation, spanning from the Paleo-Indian era through the Archaic, Woodland, and Lamar periods, to the historical presence of the Muscogee Creek people. The park's prominent features include Lamar and Mississippian period earth mounds, a colonial trading post, and Civil War earthworks. Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge (refuge), located ten miles southwest of Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park, conserves the ecosystem of the Ocmulgee River floodplain, featuring mixed hardwood and pine ridges, bottomland hardwood forests, swamp forests, and oxbow lakes. A large part of the area proposed for inclusion in the Ocmulgee Mounds National Preserve is currently under the administrative jurisdiction of the FWS or within the Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge's approved acquisition boundary.

Public Law 116-9, enacted in 2019, redesignated Ocmulgee National Monument as Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park. The designation of “national historical park” fits with the National Park Service’s standard nomenclature for a park that primarily features historic resources. However, the Department understands the intent to expand the park’s boundaries to conserve the area’s diverse natural and cultural resources and rename the park as Ocmulgee Mounds National Park and Preserve.

Public Law 116-9 also authorized a special resource study of the Ocmulgee River corridor, which extends from Macon to Hawkinsville. The study, which the NPS transmitted to Congress in November 2023, found that the corridor met the special resource study criteria for national significance and suitability for inclusion in the National Park System, but not feasibility. The study identified many challenges associated with the potential acquisition of private property in the large area evaluated in the study, in part due to existing and expanding development, agricultural and mining activities, and timber harvesting. The Study identified that opportunities to protect and provide access to the significant resources of the corridor exist via partnerships among current land managers using a variety of legal authorities.

While the Department supports the intent of S. 4216, we would like to work with the bill’s sponsor and the Committee to ensure that the lands identified for inclusion in the proposed Ocmulgee Mounds National Park and Preserve are feasible for Federal acquisition and align with the distinct laws, regulations, and policies that govern the FWS and NPS. We would also want to ensure that the prohibition on hunting for the Ocmulgee Mounds National Park section of the new unit is explicitly codified in the legislation. Finally, we want to ensure that in addition to the Muskogee (Creek) Nation, all federally recognized Tribes who have a cultural affiliation with the Ocmulgee Mounds region have the opportunity to pursue co-management or co-stewardship agreements with the NPS. We would be pleased to provide amendments for these purposes.

Chairman King, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.