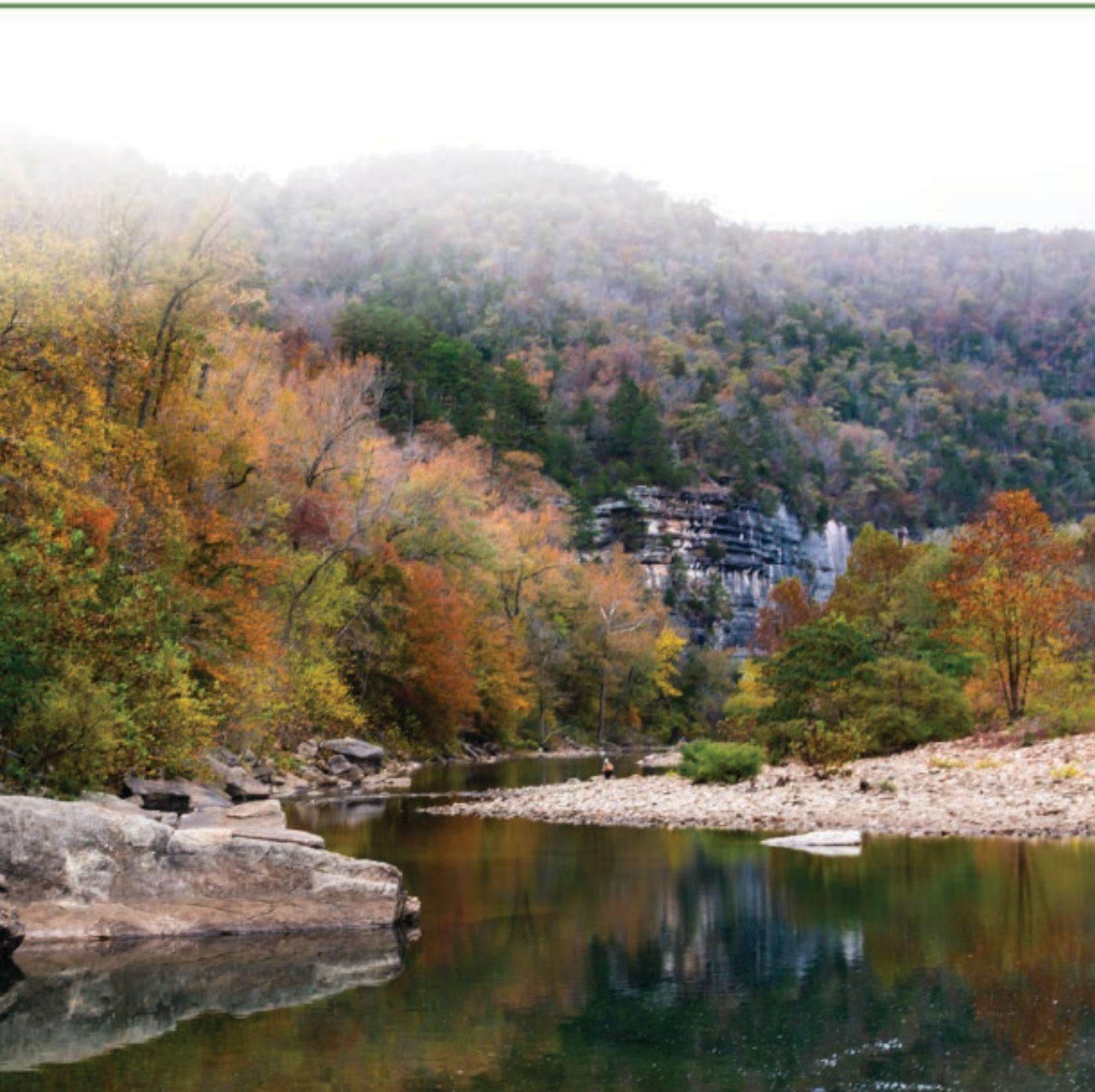


# **BUFFALO RIVER CONSERVATION COMMITTEE 2021 ANNUAL REPORT**

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# CONTENTS

Background -----	3
Buffalo River Watershed Overview -----	4
Funding and Achievements -----	5
Unpaved Roads -----	8
Cost Share Programs for Agriculture -----	8
Water and Wastewater Infrastructure -----	9
Tourism and Tourism Impacts -----	9
Moving Forward -----	10
Appendices	
Appendix A – Timeline of Efforts -----	11
Appendix B – Federal Partner Updates -----	14

Respectfully submitted to:

The Honorable Asa Hutchinson, Governor  
Co-Chairs of the Arkansas Legislative Council

Prepared by:

The Arkansas Department of Agriculture with support from Buffalo River Conservation Committee members.

# **BUFFALO RIVER CONSERVATION COMMITTEE (BRCC) 2021 ANNUAL REPORT**

## **BACKGROUND**

On September 30, 2016, Governor Hutchinson created the Beautiful Buffalo River Action Committee (BBRAC) to develop an Arkansas-led approach to identify and to address potential concerns in the Buffalo River Watershed. In its creation, Governor Hutchinson directed the BBRAC to initiate the development of a non-regulatory, Buffalo River Watershed Management Plan (WMP).

Beginning in December 2016, four stakeholder meetings were facilitated as part of the development of the voluntary, non-regulatory, WMP for the Buffalo River Watershed. Stakeholders in attendance included farmers, landowners, political representatives, state and federal agencies, and interest groups representing agriculture, conservation, and recreation.

The Buffalo River Watershed Management Plan is a voluntary, non-regulatory, nonpoint source watershed management plan consisting of nine elements. The WMP identified six sub-watersheds as priority areas: Mill Creek (upper), Calf Creek, Bear Creek, Brush Creek, Tomahawk Creek, and Big Creek (lower). It does not include regulated facilities or encompass any management practices for regulated facilities. The Buffalo River Watershed Management Plan was fully accepted by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on June 5, 2018 and can be found here <http://adeq.state.ar.us/water/planning/integrated/303d/pdfs/2018/2018-05-22-final-buffalo-river-wmp.pdf>

On September 23, 2019, Governor Hutchinson signed Executive Order 19-14 establishing the Buffalo River Conservation Committee (BRCC) which replaced the Beautiful Buffalo River Action Committee (BBRAC).

The BRCC membership consisted of the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Secretary of the Department of Energy and Environment, Secretary of the Department of Health, and Secretary of the Department of Parks, Heritage, and Tourism.

Executive Order 19-14 required the members of the BRCC to work in cooperation with one another to identify opportunities to leverage their Department's unique expertise, relationships, focus areas, and funding mechanisms in support of the vitality of the watershed.

The BRCC was also required to establish subcommittees that include key stakeholders representing local landowners, conservation organizations, environmental and technical experts, representatives of the tourism industry, county and municipal officials, and federal partners. The subcommittees were directed to identify opportunities for training, relationship building, and specific projects, all of which will be in service to preserving and enhancing water quality within the Buffalo River Watershed.

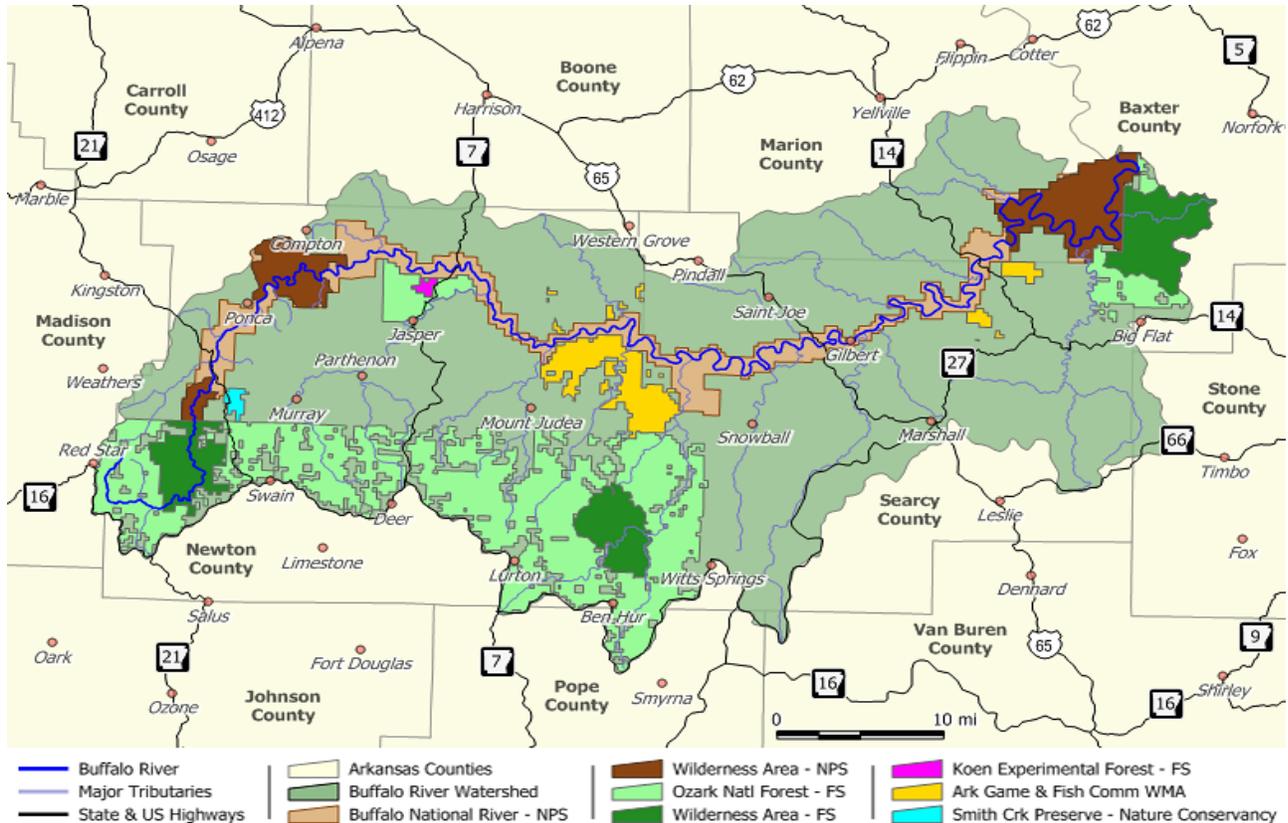
On November 15, 2019, following approval by the Arkansas Legislative Council, \$1 million from the Governor's discretionary fund was transferred to an Arkansas Department of Agriculture fund account to support grants and projects within the Buffalo River Watershed. An additional \$1 million contribution was pledged by private donors in support of the Buffalo River Watershed Enhancement Project, a regional project funded in part through the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Regional Conservation Partnership Program. The project is discussed further on page 8.

In 2021, the Arkansas General Assembly took action through Act 785 of the 2021 regular session to codify the Buffalo River Conservation Committee at Arkansas Code 15-23-1001 et seq. The legislation became effective July 28, 2021.

Act 785 retained the Secretary of the Department of Energy and Environment, the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, the Secretary of the Department of Parks, Heritage, and Tourism, and the Secretary of the Department of Health as members of the BRCC and added two new members, the County Judge of Newton County and the County Judge of Searcy County. The legislation incorporated the responsibilities listed in Executive Order 19-14.

## BUFFALO RIVER WATERSHED OVERVIEW

The Buffalo River Watershed lies within the White River Basin in Northwest Arkansas and encompasses 1,372 miles and 878,080 acres. The watershed is home to approximately 18,000 Arkansans and includes parts of Madison, Newton, Boone, Pope, Marion, Van Buren, Searcy, Baxter, and Stone Counties. The majority of the watershed lies in Newton and Searcy Counties with the smallest portion lying in Van Buren County.



The Buffalo River is 153 miles (246 km) long. The lower 135 miles (217 km) flow within the boundaries of an area managed by the National Park Service, where the stream is designated the Buffalo National River. The river flows through Newton, Searcy, Marion, and Baxter counties from west to east. The river originates in the highest part of the Boston Mountains in the Ozark mountain range, flows out onto the Springfield Plateau near the historic community of Erbie, and finally crosses a portion of Salem Plateau just before joining the White River. The upper section of the river in the Ozark National Forest is managed by the U.S. Forest Service and is designated as a National Scenic River and a National Wild River; that section is not part of the area managed as a park by the National Park Service.

The Buffalo River was designated as the nation's first National River by an Act of Congress on March 1, 1972 through Public Law 92-237. The designation ended the recurring plans of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to construct one or more dams on the river. The National River designation protects natural rivers from industrial uses, impoundments, and other obstructions that may change the natural character of the river or disrupt the natural habitat for the flora and fauna that live in or near the river. Three segments totaling 11,978 acres (48.47 km<sup>2</sup>) were designated as Buffalo National River Wilderness in 1975.

Approximately 60% of the land within the Buffalo River Watershed is privately owned. Federal ownership accounts for approximately 37 percent, and three percent of the watershed is owned by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.

The Buffalo River Watershed includes 2,518 miles of roads, with 2,007 miles or 80 percent being unpaved. The majority of unpaved roads are found in two counties; Newton County has 885 miles of unpaved roads and Searcy County has 834 miles. There are 668 points within the watershed where an unpaved road crosses a stream.

Approximately 1,245 miles or 62 percent of unpaved roads in the watershed are under county jurisdiction. Approximately 630 miles or 31 percent of unpaved roads are privately owned. Federal ownership accounts for 120 miles or six percent of the unpaved roads.

Twenty-four public water systems operate within the Buffalo River Watershed; however, none use the Buffalo River as a water source. The Arkansas Department of Energy and Environment’s Division of Environmental Quality has issued permits for four wastewater systems within the watershed: the City of Jasper, the City of Marshall, the Buffalo River National Park, and the Marble Falls Suburban Improvement District.

Agriculture and tourism are significant industries within the nine counties that contain a portion of the Buffalo River Watershed. Agriculture is Arkansas’s largest industry, followed by the tourism industry. Agriculture contributes more than \$21 billion to the state’s economy and provides one of every six jobs in the state. Tourism has a \$7.3 billion impact statewide, including \$500 million in state and local taxes.

There are 6,832 family farms on 1,606,526 acres in the region, including 235,838 harvested crop land acres. Poultry, cattle, and hay are the top three agricultural commodities, with Searcy and Newton counties having the highest number of cattle and poultry. A variety of other agricultural commodities, including pork, vegetables, melons, potatoes, sweet potatoes, fruits, tree nuts, and berries, are also produced in the area. Based on the most recent USDA data, the market value of the area’s farm products is \$815.5 million. Agritourism is expanding within the watershed, providing additional jobs and income for farms and agriculture-related venues.

Approximately 79 percent of the watershed is forested and 14 percent is grassland. The forest type group is classified as predominately Oak-Hickory with some Oak-Pine. The collective land cover of Madison, Newton, Boone, Pope, Marion, Van Buren, Searcy, Baxter, and Stone Counties contains 18.3 million tons of standing pine and more than 126 million tons of standing hardwood. The forest industry provides more than 1,000 jobs in the region

The Buffalo National River serves as a substantial tourist attraction for Arkansas. The Buffalo National River draws an estimated 1.2 million visitors annually, making it one of Arkansas’s most popular amenities. These visitors spend an estimated \$55 million in the region, providing income for business operators, creating jobs, and generating local taxes.

More economic and land use data to include information about unpaved roads within the Buffalo River Watershed can be found at [agriculture.arkansas.gov/buffalo-river-conservation-committee/](http://agriculture.arkansas.gov/buffalo-river-conservation-committee/).

## **FUNDING and ACHIEVEMENTS**

In November 2019, the Arkansas Legislative Council approved providing \$1 million from the Governor’s discretionary fund for the BRCC. The BRCC and subcommittee members selected four topic areas as the focus of the BRCC’s actions and funding: unpaved roads; cost-share programs for agriculture; water and wastewater system infrastructure; and tourism and tourism impacts.

The BRCC has approved providing \$950,079 to fund the following projects:

Cane Branch Unpaved Road, Searcy County	\$231,935
Cave Mountain Unpaved Road, Newton County	\$397,400
City of Jasper Wastewater Treatment Facility Improvements	\$250,000
Town of Gilbert Dark-Sky Streetlight Conversion	\$11,600

U.S. Geological Survey Water Study	\$65,000
U.S. Department of Agriculture Feral Hog Eradication Efforts	\$50,000
Great Searcy County Chamber of Commerce Tree Planting Project	\$2,500

Allocation of the remaining balance of \$49,921 will be discussed at the first quarterly meeting in 2022.

A summary and status report for each funded project is provided below:

- Cane Branch Road, Searcy County: \$231,935

The BRCC approved \$231,935 for the Cane Branch Road project, an unpaved road project in Searcy County that includes the installation of cross pipes, ditch reshaping, water diversion, and grade breaks over 7/10 of a mile to reduce road erosion and the resulting transport of sediment and stone. Ditch runoff from the project site directly impacts the Buffalo River.

The Arkansas Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Division pledged \$55,132 for the project from the federal Nonpoint Source Management Program.

In November 2020, \$124,806 was disbursed to Searcy County to begin work on the Cane Branch Road project. A construction bid was awarded in April 2021 and the project was completed in October. The final site inspection occurred on October 21 and all remaining funding was disbursed.

- Cave Mountain Road (Hawksbill Crag), Newton County: \$397,400

The BRCC approved \$397,400 for the Cave Mountain Road project, a 2-mile unpaved road project on one of the most heavily trafficked roads in the Buffalo River Watershed due to the popularity of Hawksbill Crag as a tourist destination. The project includes the removal of trees, installation of cross pipes, enhancement of the road base, and the installation of guard rails.

The Arkansas Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Division pledged \$55,131 for the project from the federal Nonpoint Source Management Program.

Tree removal and disposal began on the Cave Mountain Road project in the fall of 2020 after completion of an environmental assessment that was required by the National Environmental Policy Act because the road crosses National Park Service property. The work was halted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in April 2021 due to the arrival of tree dwelling bats. The bats migrated in November and work will resume soon. Newton County has not requested disbursement of the approved funding to date.

- City of Jasper Wastewater Treatment Facility Improvements: \$250,000

The City of Jasper’s existing wastewater treatment facility discharges into the Little Buffalo River approximately six miles upstream from its confluence with the Buffalo River. Necessary improvements to the wastewater treatment facility include a new sludge processing facility that would house a sludge press and associated chemical feed equipment, site pump station improvements, new flow equalization basin, and general site plumbing rehabilitation. The \$250,000 provided by the BRCC would work in conjunction with a \$440,000 loan and a \$1,351,750 loan with principal forgiveness from the Arkansas Clean Water State Revolving Loan Fund approved for the City of Jasper by the Arkansas Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Commission in 2020.

In June 2021, the \$250,000 approved by the BRCC was provided to the City of Jasper, the loans approved by the Natural Resources Commission were closed, and the contract for Phase I of the project was awarded. Construction began in September on the pump station.

Phase I of the project is expected to be operational in January 2022. Phase II is estimated to be completed in December 2022.

- Town of Gilbert Dark-Sky Streetlight Conversion Project: \$11,600

The streetlight conversion project for the town of Gilbert includes replacing the town's existing streetlights with modern zero up-light LED fixtures. The new lights are designed to shine the minimum of biologically impactful blue light and assist the town with being recognized as a Dark-Sky Town.

The \$11,600 approved by the BRCC was disbursed in November 2020. The Town Council has approved the purchase and is working with Entergy on a rate plan that will be submitted to the Arkansas Public Service Commission for approval.

- U. S. Geological Survey Water Study: \$65,000

The \$65,000 provided by the BRCC will allow the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) to continue a five-year study to determine why filamentous algae is increasing in the Buffalo River. The USGS has completed three years of study, and the funding provided by the BRCC will allow the study to continue for an additional year. The BRCC members pledged to work together to seek additional funding outside of the BRCC to complete the final year.

The total amount of approved funding was disbursed to the USGS in February 2021. Sampling for filamentous algae was conducted during the early summer and fall of 2021. The balance of remaining funds will be used for an additional five rounds of sampling estimated to start in July 2022.

- U.S. Department of Agriculture Feral Hog Eradication Project: \$50,000

The BRCC approved \$50,000 for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service Wildlife Services (Wildlife Services) to purchase supplies and material to help support existing feral hog eradication efforts conducted by Wildlife Services personnel within the Buffalo River Watershed. The majority of feral hog-related damage reported in the region in 2021 was to range and pastureland.

Funds were dispersed to Wildlife Services in February 2021. Three new trapping systems, enough materials to build 12 additional traps, trap panels, corn, and other related materials were purchased. Throughout the year, Wildlife Services personnel worked with 36 private landowners within the Buffalo River Watershed and removed 481 feral hogs in 39 removal events as of November 29, 2021.

- Greater Searcy County Chamber of Commerce Tree Planting Project: \$2,500

In 2021, the BRCC approved providing \$2,500 to the Greater Searcy County Chamber of Commerce to purchase trees that will be given to Searcy County residents and be planted in public areas within the county. The Nature Conservancy of Arkansas pledged to match the funding, bringing the total to \$5,000 for the project.

Four large sugar maples trees have been planted at the Berry Shed property owned by Searcy County. Thirty-three additional trees were planted at Raccoon Springs City Park, including 23 trees purchased with funding provided by the BRCC and 10 trees donated by the Arkansas Department of Agriculture's Urban Forestry program.

## **OTHER PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES IN THE BUFFALO RIVER WATERSHED**

In addition to the projects funded by the BRCC, many other important projects and activities within the BRCC's four focus areas were conducted by subcommittee members, partners, and stakeholders within the Buffalo River Watershed in 2021. An update on a few of these projects and activities is provided below.

## Unpaved Roads

- Richland Road Unpaved Road Project in Searcy County

In 2020, Searcy County was selected to receive funding of \$47,408 through the traditional Arkansas Unpaved Roads Program for improvements to a portion of Richland Road. Searcy County committed to providing \$53,380 in matching funds for the project.

In 2021, approximately 80 percent of the project has been completed, including the installation of ditch outlets, 12 cross pipes, and slope improvement. Of the \$47,408 provided through the Arkansas Unpaved Road Program, \$21,186 has been expended.

## Cost-Share Programs for Agriculture

- Buffalo River Watershed Enhancement Project

This project was approved in April 2020 for \$2.7 million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service's (USDA NRCS) Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP). Local partners, including The Nature Conservancy, Arkansas Department of Agriculture, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, Buffalo River Foundation, and the Buffalo River Conservation District, provided additional funding of approximately \$2.76 million. The funding is to be used for projects that aim to improve water quality by reducing sediment and nutrient loads through improving pastures management, reducing erosion from unpaved roads, and restoring riparian corridors. All participation by landowners is completely voluntary.

The Buffalo River Watershed was included in 2020 as one of five watersheds included in a joint stewardship project between the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service. Objectives of the project include protection of water quality and supply for public drinking water, tourism, fisheries, and rural industrial development; improvement of forest health and resiliency; reduction of wildfire threats; improvement of wildlife habitat; and environmental education. Funding is provided by federal, state, and private sector sponsors to help private landowners install conservation practices. All participation by landowners is voluntary.

Activities conducted through the Buffalo River Watershed Enhancement Project in 2021 include:

- A kickoff webinar to provide information about the project was held in July
  - A new website about the RCPP program and the Buffalo River Watershed Enhancement
  - 13 contracts with private landowners have been approved by USDA NRCS for a total of \$343,787.
  - A private landowner unpaved road project was completed in July for \$18,000 and will serve as a demonstration site for unpaved road management practices. Best management practices installed through the project included 2 conveyor belt diverters, 1 cross pipe, 2 broad-based dips, and an increase to the out-slope of the road to improve drainage.
  - A video series is being developed by local partners to outline the three pillars of the RCPP program and provide virtual site visits to demonstrate management practices and potential solutions.
  - A nonpoint source project aimed at pasture management is in the process of being implemented.
- Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership Program
- Through the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership Program (Joint Chiefs'), the USDA NRCS and the Forest Service provided more than \$2.3 million for a project in Arkansas titled "Building Resilient Watershed to Improve Drinking Water in the Ozarks and Ouachita Highlands 2020-2022". A portion of this funding is to be used within the Buffalo River Watershed to work with agricultural producers, forest landowners, and National Forest System lands to improve forest health using available Farm Bill conservation programs and others. All participation by landowners is completely voluntary.

Accomplishments within the Buffalo River Watershed through the Joint Chiefs' project in 2021 include:

- Obligating \$770,346 for 34 contracts with landowners for forestry-related practices on 11,402 acres in Marion, Newton, Searcy, and Stone Counties.
- The forestry-related practices include the construction of 172,543 feet of firebreaks and forest stand improvements contracted on 274.6 acres.

### Water and Wastewater System Infrastructure

- Marble Falls Sewer Improvement District No. 1

The Marble Falls wastewater treatment plant does not operate well due to it being sized for a time when there was a larger community and a fully functioning amusement park at Dogpatch. The outfall for this facility discharges into a creek that eventually leads to the Buffalo River.

During the summer of 2021, Bass Pro founder, Johnny Morris bought the former Dogpatch property for development as the Marble Falls Nature Park. Representatives of Mr. Morris met with the Marble Falls Sewer Improvement District No. 1 to discuss moving forward with improvements to the wastewater treatment facility to serve the needs of the community and proposed new development. An application for funding assistance will be reviewed by the Arkansas Natural Resources Commission in December.

- City of Marshall Water System

The Arkansas Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Commission had approved for the City of Marshall a total funding amount of \$2,095,675 through two separate loans with principal forgiveness in 2015 and 2020 from the Arkansas Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Fund. The funds were provided to rehabilitate the City’s water mains and reduce water loss in its water distribution system. The project was completed in November 2020.

- Septic Tank Remediation Program

Many people within the Buffalo River Watershed live in areas which are not served by municipal sewers and wastewater treatment is accomplished using septic systems. Considering that some regional soils are generally rocky and thin, conventional septic systems consisting of a septic tank and drain field are occasionally ineffective and can degrade water quality. In addition, when not maintained, even a functioning septic system can eventually fail and leach contaminants into the ground and directly into water sources.

The Arkansas Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Division has implemented Septic Tank Remediation Programs in the Illinois River and Upper White River watersheds to provide resources and information to existing homeowners for replacement of old, failing systems, and promote proper maintenance of existing systems. The Natural Resources Division partners with a local entity within each watershed for administration of the programs. The Natural Resources Division plans to expand the program to the Buffalo River Watershed in 2022 and is actively seeking a local partner.

### Tourism and Tourism Impacts

The Tourism Working Group members and stakeholders have been active participants in BRCC meetings throughout the year, offering insight and recommendations on the efforts of the BRCC. The National Parks Service and Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage, and Tourism (ADPHT) have both provided updates and information in BRCC Subcommittee meetings. For example, ADPHT provided information to the BRCC Subcommittee on the Business Interruptions Grants provided to businesses in and near the watershed in late-2020 as well as updates on some of the Arkansas State Parks Outdoor Grants Program recipients. ADPHT will work with other partners to ensure that grant opportunities are widely shared with interested stakeholders.

- Arkansas Office of Outdoor Recreation

In addition, the major development for the Tourism Working Group came when the ADPHT announced the creation of a new Office of Outdoor Recreation within ADPHT. The OOR will play a role as the key connector for state and federal agencies, local and county governments, nonprofits, and other stakeholders to identify, prioritize, and implement projects and initiatives that advance outdoor recreation.

While the OOR will serve the entire state, the Buffalo River Watershed, as home to many of the state's most prized outdoor recreation opportunities, is expected to be the source of many, significant opportunities. ADPHT recently hired Kathrine Andrews as the first director for the OOR. She will be a key contact for Tourism Working Group members and other stakeholders across the watershed. Secretary Hurst has tasked her with engaging the Tourism Working Group participants and other stakeholders to bring new opportunities and ideas forward for the BRCC to consider. ADPHT looks forward to providing updates to the BRCC on the work of the ORR throughout the coming year.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

BRCC members and subcommittee members will continue to work with partners to maximize the use of state and federal funding on projects within the Buffalo River Watershed.

BRCC members and subcommittee members will continue to meet as needed on the four topic areas of: unpaved roads; cost-share programs for agriculture; water and wastewater system infrastructure; and tourism and tourism impacts.

The BRCC members and subcommittee members will convene as a whole at least once per quarter and submit an annual report that is intended to document the important work being accomplished within the watershed as well as identify areas where additional partnerships and funding can create lasting impacts.

## APPENDIX A - TIMELINE OF EFFORTS

<b>November 15, 2019</b>	Following approval by the Arkansas Legislative Council, a total of \$2 million was available for the BRCC efforts. \$1 million from the Governor’s discretionary fund, and \$1 million from private donors.
<b>December 12, 2019</b>	A 17-member subcommittee was established that is comprised of local landowners, local city and county government officials, and stakeholders in the areas of agriculture, conservation, and tourism.
<b>January 23, 2020</b>	The first meeting of the BRCC members and subcommittee members scheduled to take place in Marshall, Arkansas was cancelled due to inclement weather.
<b>February 13, 2020</b>	BRCC members and subcommittee members convened in Marshall, Arkansas for the first meeting. During this meeting the discussion centered around four main topic areas that will be the focus for future BRCC action and funding proposals. These four topic areas include: unpaved roads; cost-share programs for agriculture; water and wastewater system infrastructure; and tourism and tourism impacts.
<b>March 11, 2020</b>	The first coronavirus case in Arkansas prompted the cancellation of scheduled subcommittee meetings on March 19, 2020 and April 2, 2020.
<b>April 29, 2020</b>	BRCC members and subcommittee members convened by conference call to get an update on the work of the four subcommittees and discuss efforts to move forward.
<b>June 2, 2020</b>	<p>BRCC members and subcommittee members convened to review proposals submitted for funding as well as receive updates from the four topic areas. Requests for funding included four unpaved roads sites as well as three water and wastewater proposals.</p> <p>During the meeting the four unpaved roads sites and funding of \$250,000 to the City of Jasper for wastewater treatment facility improvements received recommendations for funding.</p>
<b>June 9, 2020</b>	Presentation to the House and Senate Public Health, Welfare and Labor Committee. The presentation included an update on the BRCC efforts and the current status of funding requests. Secretary Ward stated that the BRCC members and subcommittee members would continue to refine the funding proposals that were received and will work with partners in order to maximize the use of state funding on projects within the Buffalo River Watershed.
<b>July 2, 2020</b>	The BRCC Tourism Work Group met to discuss tourism in the Buffalo River Watershed and to consider potential collaborative/engagement opportunities. Participants identified a strong interest in better understanding the feasibility of a process for developing a day-use permit system. The Tourism Work Group committed to work with the National Park Services as a partner in the park’s efforts to conduct appropriate studies to better understand this issue and recommend policies.
<b>August 6, 2020</b>	<p>BRCC members and subcommittee members convened to review updated proposals submitted for funding and received updates from the four topic areas.</p> <p>BRCC members and subcommittee members decided to table discussions regarding funding for Marble Falls and Feral Hogs until additional information was provided. The BRCC approved the following updated requests for funding:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>(1) maintaining the funding amount of \$250,000 to the City of Jasper for wastewater treatment facility improvements;</li></ol>

(2) revising funding requests for Unpaved Roads to reflect \$231,935 for Cane Branch Road in Searcy County and \$397,400 for Cave Mountain Road (to Hawksbill Crag) in Newton County. The total funding for Unpaved Roads equates to a \$570,979 once contingency costs are added and funding from the federal nonpoint source management program are subtracted.

- August 20, 2020** Presentation to the House and Senate Public Health, Welfare and Labor Committee. The presentation included an update on the BRCC efforts and the current status of funding requests. The legislative committee approved the funding request of \$250,000 to the City of Jasper and \$570,979 to assist with the Cane Branch Road and Cave Mountain Road unpaved road sites. With the approval of the two projects, funding of \$179,021 remains for distribution by the BRCC.
- November 4, 2020** BRCC members and subcommittee members convened to receive updates from the four topic areas and review a funding proposal. The BRCC approved providing funding to the Town of Gilbert for their Dark-Sky Streetlight Conversion Proposal in the amount of \$11,600.
- November 9, 2020** Consideration of the Town of Gilbert funding proposal was reviewed and approved by the House and Senate Public Health, Welfare and Labor Committee. With the approval of this project, funding of \$167,421 remains for distribution by the BRCC.
- November 9, 2020** Joint press release from the BRCC members distributed seeking applications for projects that need assistance through the remaining \$167,421 in funding available through the BRCC. Applications were accepted through December 15, 2020.
- December 15, 2020** Applications seeking assistance were received for five eligible projects. Funding proposals included requests for assistance with feral hog eradication, tree planting in Searcy County, the purchase and renovation of an historic building in Jasper for public use, and two Buffalo River algae bloom studies. Applications will be reviewed and discussed by the BRCC and subcommittee members at the next quarterly meeting.
- January 7, 2021** BRCC members and subcommittee members convened to for updates on topic areas and receive presentations and consider the eligible proposals received by the December 15, 2020 application deadline.
- January 21, 2021** BRCC members and subcommittee members reconvened to continue funding discussions. The BRCC members agreed to provide \$65,000 in funding to the U.S. Geological Survey to continue a water quality study and \$2,500 to fund the Searcy County Chamber of Commerce tree proposal
- January 29, 2021** BRCC members and subcommittee members reconvened to consider the feral hog eradication proposal submitted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Wildlife Services. The BRCC members agreed to provide \$50,000 for the feral hog eradication project and conduct additional research on the proposed mobile app project.
- February 4, 2021** Secretary Ward provided a report on the BRCC's activities and presented funding recommendations to the Arkansas House and Senate Joint Budget Committee. The funding recommendations were approved.
- February 9, 2021** \$50,000 approved by the BRCC for feral hog eradication efforts in the Buffalo River Watershed was disbursed to the U.S. Department of Agriculture
- February 19, 2021** \$65,000 approved by the BRCC for the continuation of the U.S. Geological Survey's (USGS) water quality study on the Buffalo River was provided to the USGS.
- April 9, 2021** \$2,500 was disbursed for the Greater Searcy County Chamber of Commerce tree planting project.
- June 9, 2021** \$250,000 was disbursed to the City of Jasper for improvements to the water treatment facility.

- June 29, 2021** The BRCC met to receive updates from the four topic areas and discuss Act 536 that codified the BRCC in Arkansas Code. Senator Irvin provided remarks about her sponsorship of Act 536 to help ensure the work of the BRCC continues.
- September 29, 2021** BRCC members and subcommittee members met in Jasper for project updates and a presentation from representatives of Johnny Morris and Bass Pro Shops regarding plans to redevelop the former Dogpatch theme park property in Newton County.
- November 30, 2021** BRCC members and subcommittee members met in Marshall for project updates. The BRCC members agreed to consider funding proposals for the remaining balance of \$49,921 at the first quarterly meeting in 2022.

## **APPENDIX B - FEDERAL PARTNER UPDATES**

### **2021 Update on National Forest Service Activities within the Buffalo River Watershed**

The 857,632 acre Buffalo River watershed includes 177,220 acres of Forest Service lands (21% of watershed) intermixed with private and state ownership (68% of watershed), and the Buffalo National River (11% of the watershed) in Newton and Searcy Counties. Congressionally designated Leatherwood, Richland Creek and Upper Buffalo Wilderness areas make up 40,479 acres (23%) of Forest Service lands within the watershed. During the summer of 2021, monitoring revealed a maternity colony of Endangered Indiana Bat. The monitoring is continuing with cooperative efforts from the US Fish & Wildlife Service and Arkansas Game & Fish Commission. Protection measures for this discovery are in the updated Revised Forest and Land Management Plan for the Ozark St. Francis National Forest and reflected in the Bat Conservation Forest Plan amendment, finalized in March of 2021.

In 2021, the public review and objection period of the Robert's Gap Environmental Assessment was completed with a final decision expected in late October of 2021. The project focuses on improving long term sustainability of forest conditions, water quality and recreational opportunities. The project includes trail additions and relocation for hiking and mountain biking, addresses parking issues at Whitaker Point, commercial thinning of pine and hardwoods, regeneration of some hardwoods areas, wildlife improvement of ponds, food plots, road maintenance and closures. Prescribed burning is included in the project to increase ground cover diversity and reduce fuel loading. Analysis of these activities shows no long term impacts on water quality, and water quality monitoring is being conducted in advance and throughout the life of the project. The Forest Service continues to engage with interested groups, counties, agencies and individuals about management activities and access within the watershed.

### **2021 Update on Buffalo National River Activities**

Following in the footsteps of what we all considered a challenging year, 2021 continued to test our abilities to protect and conserve Buffalo National River while providing for its enjoyment by communities and visitors. What follows is a brief overview of some of the work going on at Buffalo National River, specific to the four major elements of the Buffalo River Conservation Committee (BRCC). It continues to be a pleasure for the National Park Service (NPS) at Buffalo National River to work alongside the BRCC and the many dedicated committee members and communities working toward protecting the watershed.

#### **Water Quality and Septic Systems**

Buffalo National River has a long history of collecting water quality samples dating back to the 1980's. In 2021, Buffalo National River scientists collected hundreds of water samples throughout the park, including tributary, spring, and main stem sites, to analyze potential impacts to water quality, aquatic organisms, and human health. Specifically, the park collected seasonal routine samples at 32 sites, with samples analyzed in partnership with Arkansas Department of Energy and Environment (ADEE) for nutrients and continued sampling (since 2013) for the Big Creek project. These data are used to assess for 303d listings and observe trends to guide management actions regarding resource protection and visitor safety. The park shares data with Arkansas Department of Health, ADEE, the Ozark Society, and with the NPS Office of Public Health.

Some examples of projects the park worked on in 2021 include:

- Finalized a three-year long river-wide quantitative and qualitative survey of mussel populations in partnership with United States Geologic Survey (USGS), Columbia Environmental Research Center, and Arkansas State University. The study included multiple presentations at professional conferences, such as the Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry, to document the effects of Nitrogen compounds and their impacts on survival and condition of Juvenile

Arkansas Brokenray *Lampsilis Reeveiana* and the long-term monitoring of freshwater mussel beds at Buffalo National River.

- Continued river-wide filamentous algae surveys in cooperation with USGS-Little Rock, ADEE, and Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (AGFC).
- Contributed to a nationwide pilot project to study early detection of Harmful Algal Blooms (HAB). Buffalo National River and select other National Park Units, in collaboration with the National Park Service's Office of Public Health, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Cyanobacteria Monitoring Collaborative, and NOAA's Phytoplankton Monitoring Network, are working to establish protocols for HAB monitoring and toxin sampling.
- Contracted the USGS to characterize potential sources of fecal contributions to the river. Samples were collected to identify microbial source tracking (MST) marker concentrations to help provide an understanding of the sources of fecal contamination.
- In collaboration with the Arkansas Water Resources Center located at the University of Arkansas, park staff compiled and analyzed decades of data to understand trends in water quality and inform the future of the park's long term water quality program.
- Buffalo National River received a grant of \$53,600 from the National Park Foundation to support science in the river. The project, titled "Mapping Suitable Habitat of Threatened and Endangered Freshwater Mussels in Buffalo National River," includes the purchase of a doppler system for mapping cross-sectional water velocity. This equipment will be used to gain better understanding of the relationship of stream flow and river channel structure in the development and maintenance of habitats suitable for mussel beds and will allow focused searches in reaches more likely to contain threatened and endangered species to help inform management actions for preserving them.
- Buffalo National River aquatic team in partnership with Arkansas State University analyzed data collected during the 2020 park closure due to COVID-19. This project titled "Effects of Park Closure on Water Quality in the Buffalo National River" will be presented through a poster presentation at the Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry meeting.
- Buffalo National River purchased sonar equipment and software to produce 3D images of the river channel and failing streambanks to understand water quality and prioritize streambank revetment projects in future years.

The park has completed geotechnical surveys and soil profile tests that will be used to examine waste treatment alternatives at Kyles Landing and Ozark Campgrounds. Both areas' septic systems have reached the end of their life cycle. The new infrastructure will be designed and located to accommodate changing visitor use patterns most efficiently and to protect natural and cultural resources. The park routinely inspects wastewater systems in the park and works closely with state agencies and the US Public Health Service to protect water quality.

#### Unpaved Roads

The Cave Mountain Cave Road project in Newton County is in process. The park has the lead in coordinating with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and is completing an environmental assessment in partnership with the County.

Buffalo National River and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) are currently developing projects that will resurface damaged or deteriorated paved roads and parking areas within the boundary of Buffalo National River. While most of the work is resurfacing paved roads, there are two unpaved roads and parking areas identified to be paved located at the Ponca access area and Lost Valley recreation area. Both paving projects will reduce potential impacts to the watershed and improve visitor

access. The park recently completed engineering scoping reports for the project areas and will be coordinating with FHWA to acquire funding for the projects.

## Agriculture

Over 1500 acres in the park, across three counties (Marion, Newton, and Searcy) at Buffalo National River, are in agricultural use. These agricultural fields are used by local farmers who conduct haying and grazing activities under Special Use Permits (SUP) issued by the NPS. The park issued new SUPs in 2021, and there are currently 29 hay permits and six grazing permits. Updated permit conditions require permittees to implement specific best management practices (BMP) for agricultural fields. These BMPs include appropriate setbacks from riparian zones and nutrient management (fertilizer/lime applications) based on recommendations from the University of Arkansas and county extension agents. Hundreds of the acres which are in agricultural production also have wildlife management enhancement plans associated with them. The park works in partnership with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission to provide winter forage for elk and diverse habitat for turkey and other ground nesting birds.

## Tourism

2021 visitation for Buffalo National River is on track to be higher than the 2020 numbers even though the river water levels were lower for most of the late summer season, reducing river use. By the end of September 2021, year to date park visitation had more than 1.4 million visitors, with October, November, and December yet to be recorded.

The most recent NPS economic impact data available indicates that in 2020, 1.47 million park visitors spent an estimated \$66.3 million in local gateway regions while visiting Buffalo National River. These expenditures supported a total of 960 jobs, \$23.7 million in labor income, \$41.2 million in value added, and \$76.1 million in economic output in local gateway economies surrounding Buffalo National River.

A significant park access project in motion is the Buffalo Point Launch realignment construction project. Work is beginning in November of 2021. An accessible walkway and observation area will replace the damaged launch access road. This project will reduce infrastructure in the frequent flood area and increase recreational experiences for a larger variety of visitors.

The park continues to study and develop infrastructure projects that will better serve the public at river access points and roads, while designing for sustainability and enjoyment of the resources.

In 2021, the park completed the preliminary planning process for a comprehensive river management plan. This internal review process helped the park evaluate existing plans and data, as well as identify any data or planning gaps that need to be collected prior to beginning a comprehensive river management plan. This plan has been requested and, when funded by the NPS, will be created to address the ever-growing visitation on the river, access management, infrastructure requirements (e.g. parking and restrooms), and the protection of natural and cultural resources in the park. This plan will require significant amounts of stakeholder input and the BRCC is a natural organization to work alongside the park in the creation of an inclusive plan for the public's park. The plan will be subject to the National Environmental Policy Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and include public and Tribal input. It will address all facets of the work the BRCC is focused on.

## Summary

The NPS at Buffalo National River looks forward to future partnership opportunities in the watershed, of which the BRCC plays an important role. The shared mission of working with communities, residents, and stakeholders in the Buffalo River Watershed make the BRCC and NPS partnership an integral part of protecting the watershed.

# Serving all Arkansans



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2021 ANNUAL REPORT**