

**BUFFALO NATIONAL RIVER MANAGEMENT PLAN
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT COMMENT SUMMARY**

August 2026

INTRODUCTION

The National Park Service (NPS) held a civic engagement period to receive feedback on the Buffalo River Management Plan newsletter from March 9, 2026, through April 10, 2026. The newsletter summarized management goals and preliminary strategies. During this time, the planning team held one virtual meeting and three in-person open house events, where they presented a slideshow and shared information about the planning process, answered questions, and received feedback from the public.

An in-person event was held for each of the three districts of the park. Public engagement meeting details, the newsletter, and a corresponding online commenting platform were published on the project PEPC website (<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/BUFFrmp>). The public was invited to provide input on the planning effort through the online commenting platform, and was asked the following questions:

1. What thoughts do you have about the proposed options for future river management shared in this newsletter? Do you have any suggestions to refine or improve these strategies?
2. The National Park Service has proposed various site redesigns for key river access points. What information do you think the planning team should consider when analyzing these ideas and strategies?
3. Which management strategies do you think best achieve both the experiences you desire to have on the river and the overall purpose of the plan?
4. Are there other ideas that should be considered that are not already presented? What is missing, and why should it be considered?
5. What other comments or suggestions do you have?

COMMENT SUMMARIES

NPS received 117 public correspondences, mostly from Arkansas residents (table 1), including letters from: the Arkansas Office of Outdoor Recreation, the Buffalo River Watershed Alliance, the Ozark Society, Arkansas Backcountry Horsemen, the Arkansas Climbers Coalition, and the National Parks Conservation Association. Approximately 125 people attended the open house events and the virtual public meeting.

Table 1. Correspondence Received by State

State	No. of Correspondences
AR	97
MO	6
LA	2
OK	2
DC	1
SC	1

State	No. of Correspondences
TN	1
AZ	1
Unknown	5
TOTAL	117

The following summaries capture key ideas and feedback received during the civic engagement period. Comments are organized by plan issue statements, with key themes listed underneath each issue.

ISSUE 1: RIVER RESOURCE IMPACTS AND RIVER HEALTH

Waste, Water Quality, and Sanitation – Commenters suggested the park address water quality, waste disposal, and visitor education to improve conditions. Commenters suggested expanded restroom capacity, portable toilet dumping stations, human waste disposal requirements, and improved educational messaging and enforcement.

- Related strategies supported or suggested by the public:
 - Expanded restroom capacity at high-use sites.
 - Human waste disposal requirements for overnight trips.
 - Increase messaging, education, and enforcement of river etiquette, proper waste disposal, and Leave No Trace.
- Representative quotes:
 - “*River etiquette needs to be taught explicitly on the website and through direct patronage, not just law enforcement (and offers in multiple languages - like where to use the bathrooms, noise levels, leave no trace, etc.).*”
 - “*Methods considered could include: -Planning for and installing SCAT machines (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/t-d/pubs/pdfimage/94231308.pdf>) to create ways for campers to dispose of waste properly after getting off the river.*”

Resource Protection and Climate Resilience – Commenters suggested protecting and preserving specific river values and emphasized the need for adaptive management, erosion control, climate-informed design, watershed protection, and proactive monitoring of ecological indicators such as turbidity, algae, bank erosion, and wildlife habitat conditions. Specifically, commenters suggested stabilizing eroding gravel bars; preserving historic landscapes, soundscapes, and dark skies; and monitoring and managing river resources including the development of indicators and thresholds for resource conditions.

- Select strategies supported or suggested by the public:
 - Protect the ecological function of gravel bars.

- Develop a formal adaptive management framework with clear indicators and thresholds and a strategy for bank protection.
- Investigate nuisance algae drivers and repeat baseline fish community studies.
- Reclaiming overgrown meadows/open areas (e.g., near Woolum) to improve wildlife movement and visitor access, referencing past agricultural maintenance that kept areas open.
- Expanded partnerships with the US Forest Service, state agencies, local agricultural producers, and conservation NGOs (e.g., Audubon Conservation Ranching) to improve management.
- Place parking and structures out of sightlines from the river and build around trees to retain shade and natural feel.
- Representative Quotes:
 - *“Remember that the Buffalo National River is Arkansas's first International Dark Sky Park.”*
 - *“There are areas of the river that are eroding and those should be stabilized using natural methods. Stream banks should be revegetated with native species.”*

ISSUE 2: VISITOR EXPERIENCE, CROWDING, AND SAFETY CONCERNS

Crowding and Congestion Management – Comments described concerns about congestion, especially in the Middle District and at popular river access points. They suggested a range of solutions, from permits to designated camping.

- Related strategies supported or suggested by the public:
 - Identify reasonable group sizes and number of allowable vessels and floaters.
 - Consider permits or lottery systems for overnight and day use, paired with educational messaging to protect resources and experiences.
 - Consider reservations for access or camping only if systems allow in-person options, cash payments, and accessibility for visitors without smartphones.
 - Implement staggered launch times.
 - Provide optional shuttles, off-site parking, and concessioner-operated transportation options during peak season to reduce vehicle congestion. Consider shuttles to move people for commercial operator clients to reduce shuttling of vehicles.
 - Manage for some day-use-only locations but continue to provide areas for overnight gravel-bar camping in ways that reduce congestion.

- Representative Quotes:
- *“I believe the park service should consider permitting private boaters on peak usage days. For the upper district this would be Saturdays in April and May (and Memorial Day Sunday) ... More shuttles for kayaking would be utilized often if priced right.”*
 - *“I like Grinder's Ferry being a day use only site during PEAK months (May - Sept). It gets very congested and loud there during that time where it can be unsafe for the balance of floaters and shoalers.”*
 - *“I would hate to see Grinder's Ferry become day use only. I feel this will put a lot of folks over at Shine Eye and make it too crowded.”*

Education and Communication – Commenters expressed strong support for clearer trip-planning information, updated signs, multilanguage river etiquette messaging, concessioner education requirements, and more consistent communication about rules, risks, and expected behaviors.

- Related strategies supported or suggested by the public:
 - Enhance multilanguage river etiquette education.
 - Improve signs to explain why certain protections or changes are being implemented (e.g., erosion processes and reasons for bank protection measures).
 - Develop centralized data dashboards and usage patterns to make available to the public (e.g., best times to avoid crowds and access point conditions).
 - Communicate about adaptive management strategies and provide updates on how well plans are being implemented; publish data to build understanding for any future permit or reservation systems.

ISSUE 3: RIVER ACCESS AND ASSOCIATED INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure Improvements – Comments supported expanding parking, providing additional recreation, stabilizing access points, and improving traffic flow.

- Related strategies supported or suggested by the public:
 - Improve road conditions and parking lots to manage congestion and improve visitor safety and resource conditions at key river access points.
 - Coordinate with County authorities to improve roads with frequent washouts.
 - Improve restrooms and facilities to reduce human waste.
 - Add small shelters or shade structures at shuttle pickup points.
 - Avoid removing forests for large parking lots and instead design lots around existing trees.

- Provide improved accessible trails near the river.
- Representative Quotes:
 - *“Roads that are steep and rough tend to wash out more often. Paving those and creating safer access, would be very beneficial to protecting the park. Continuing to take care of and update the restrooms and facilities at the accesses and on the park, will also create a better visitor experience, and help with less human waste and trash waste being spread across the park.”*
 - *“The reroutes of traffic at Hasty, Grinder's Ferry, Gilbert and Rush: I especially like using current parking lots and roads at Rush to improve parking. I particularly like the value put on bank stabilization at the two locations at Rush Landing.”*

Development Concerns - Comments expressed concern that expanding access points, roads, and parking may unintentionally increase visitation, intensify crowding, degrade resources, and diminish the natural experience. Other comments emphasized the idea that the park should focus on maintaining, repairing, and stabilizing existing sites rather than enlarging developed footprints. Comments suggested that expansion of infrastructure undermines the Buffalo River's wilderness-like qualities and promotes unsustainable use.

- Related strategies supported or suggested by the public:
 - Evaluate kayak slides – some commenters felt kayak slides are impractical, flood-vulnerable, or unsuitable for canoe users and preferred soft ramps, while others were open to testing a slide at a difficult access point before widespread installation.
 - Improve safety at access points and balance efficient access with maintaining a sense of remoteness, naturalness, and quiet.
 - Ensure new infrastructure blends into the landscape to maintain the park's visual character.
 - Pair any parking or access expansion with operational strategies such as staggered launch times or shuttle options.
 - Avoid increasing parking lot size in floodplains or placing infrastructure in areas vulnerable to severe flooding or frequent high-water events and relocate camping away from flood-prone sites where necessary.
 - Allowing select access points—particularly less developed ones—to remain minimally maintained.
- Representative Quotes:
 - *“All the accesses in the middle and lower districts without bridges, with the exception of Rush, Gilbert, Tyler Bend, and Woolum should no longer be maintained. They should remain open but should be left to become like the Sand Hole, Margret White,*

Brewers, cedar creek type of places. This will not deter locals and serious committed paddlers from those places, but it will keep the "problem crowd" confined."

- *"In addition to physical redesign, consideration should be given to launch timing, staging practices, vehicle impacts, and how increased access may influence user behavior and resource conditions over time."*
- *"When analyzing site redesigns for river access points, I believe the planning team should carefully consider long-term visitation increases, not just current usage levels. . . I believe strategies focused on maintaining current infrastructure, managing visitor flow, and protecting natural areas would best balance access with preservation."*
- *"The proposed infrastructure expansions and facility developments should be reconsidered, and the plan should instead emphasize preservation, minimal development, and long-term protection of the river corridor."*

Accessibility and Mobility Considerations – Comments highlighted the need for improved access at various locations for visitors who use wheelchairs or walkers, or who have mobility impairments.

- Related strategies supported or suggested by the public:
 - Provide accessible river viewpoints and trail access where possible.
 - Improve path gradients, design manageable step heights, and consider handrails and benches along longer paths.
 - Consider raising the current 9.9-horsepower (hp) motor limit to 20 hp to allow more flexible river travel that may improve access for older or mobility-limited visitors.
- Representative Quotes:
 - *"As a senior, I'm all in favor of every easier launch site. Currently, it's daunting to get down and back up from the river alone at age 60+. There's no way a handicapped person could ever access the river at Hasty."*
 - *I don't know if there is a spot somewhere under NPS jurisdiction where some type of paved auto pull-out with scenic views of the river exists for mobility impaired folks, but this would be a nice feature."*

ISSUE 4: BALANCING COMMERCIAL USE MANAGEMENT WITH NONCOMMERCIAL USE

Balancing Use - Commenters expressed a desire to balance commercial and noncommercial use of the river, noting that business operators, landowners, neighbors, and the river itself experience various advantages and disadvantages from visitation. They noted that any actions (such as permits) should apply to both commercial and noncommercial users.

- Related strategies supported or suggested by the public:

- Manage noncommercial use more consistently with commercial use.
- Require concessioners to use buses or vans to reduce traffic at access points by minimizing private vehicle shuttles.
- Continue to manage the number of rental watercraft due to their contribution to congestion and conflict.
- Ensure that visitors (commercial and noncommercial) are provided with consistent and accurate trip information (e.g., water level, duration, difficulty, needed provisions) and standardized pre-launch education.
- Evaluate new business opportunities; however, commenters noted that large commercial developments (e.g. restaurants, hotels, or major infrastructure) should be emphasized in gateway communities.
- Allow informal ridesharing or shuttle services.
- Representative Quotes:
 - *Concession operations already function under structured limits designed to reduce congestion and improve safety. Establishing similar expectations for private users would address a significant portion of current challenges and create a more balanced system.”*

ISSUE 5: NATIONAL RIVER SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPACTS TO WILDERNESS CHARACTER

Wilderness Character – Commenters expressed that management strategies should prioritize the river’s wild character, water quality, riparian health, wilderness experience, dark skies, quiet soundscapes, and sensitive habitats before expanding access or infrastructure, as well as the idea that the Buffalo River’s value lies in its wildness and low-impact recreation opportunities.

- Related strategies supported or suggested by the public:
 - Protect low-use quiet sections.
 - Encourage the use of contracted outfitters by inexperienced users.
 - Use motion-activated, low-impact lighting where necessary.
- Representative quotes:
 - “...*The Buffalo National River is one of the few remaining free-flowing rivers in the United States and represents a rare example of an intact Ozark river ecosystem. Its value lies in its natural condition, scenic beauty, and undeveloped character...*”
 - “...*River access points should be maintained without expansion. Violations, parking and otherwise, should be enforced. Larger parking lots bring in more people. I desire an experience with as few people as possible. I desire an experience without crowds. I desire to not listen to other peoples music. I desire to experience a natural river, not a water park...*”

OTHER THEMES

Affordability and Historic or Customary Use – Commenters stressed the need to maintain historic or customary uses such as dispersed gravel-bar camping, free or low-cost access options, and river experiences that remain flexible, spontaneous, and inclusive for locals and long-time users.

Enforcement and Staffing – Commenters described the idea that higher visitation and complex issues require more rangers and a stronger on-river presence—noting that many problems stem from behavior, not infrastructure, and therefore require enforcement and stewardship rather than expanded capacity.

- Related strategies supported or suggested by the public:
 - Consider whether staffing levels can realistically support new access patterns or rules or how size limits would be monitored when multiple groups naturally merge on the river.
 - Coordinate with local volunteers and groups to assist with vegetation clearance, trail maintenance, or cemetery care, achieving this coordination through formal programs.
 - Hire campground hosts or volunteers at access areas to provide on-site education, rule reminders, and basic visitor assistance.

Process - Commenters provided feedback about the planning process, requested more detailed information, and asked clarifying questions about proposed management actions. Many expressed a desire for greater transparency, clearer explanations, and opportunities for other types of public involvement.

- Related strategies supported or suggested by the public:
 - Update the plan at least every 20 years, with participation from local scientists, users, concessioners, and municipal land use planners.

OUT-OF-SCOPE: ISSUES OUTSIDE OF THIS PLAN'S SCOPE OF WORK

The topics and issues listed below were received during the public comment period and determined by the planning team to be out of scope for this planning effort. Although each comment was reviewed by the planning team, only comments pertaining to issues, actions, and strategies within the river corridor were considered by the team for development of the River Management Plan.

Cave Access – Commenters suggested reopening caves with responsible management practices, balancing resource protection with the public's interest in opening caves for guided or unguided visitor exploration. Comments mentioned potential partnerships with state entities to manage tours and enhance educational opportunities.

Trails, Shared Use, and Connectivity – Trail improvements.

- Related strategies supported or suggested by the public:

- Improve trail signs.
- Add signs clarifying right-of-way expectations for hikers/stock users.
- Maintain and complete trail connectors.
- Add wayfinding signs at confusing junctions such as on the Old Railroad Trail.
- Finish remaining trail gaps to create a through-hiking experience while minimizing construction of new trails in designated wilderness areas, drawing on the help of volunteer groups to assist with maintenance.
- Stabilization or upkeep at Tyler Bend Trail to prevent erosion and protect natural features.
- Facilitate events that cross park lands, such as bicycle races.

Boxley Valley – Commenters recommended reviewing earlier plans, such as the Boxley Valley Comprehensive Management Plan.

Climbing – Some commenters requested designated climbing areas and associated parking at trailheads.

Equestrian and Biking – Suggestions included expanded opportunities for biking in addition to existing hiking and horseback riding activities, additional hitching rails, improved horse camps and related signs, relocated tie-ups, maintained access to historic abandoned roads and gravel bars, and expanded trailhead parking (e.g., Boxley, Compton, Hathaway, Erbie, Log Wagon Gap, Tie Slide overlook).

UTVs and Drones – One commenter suggested allowing UTV access to park roadways and river access points. Others strongly opposed UTV or side-by-side vehicle access, citing concerns about resource damage and pointing to impacts seen in other regions. Some commenters supported prohibiting drones entirely to protect natural soundscapes, wildlife, and overall visitor experience.

Fire Management – Commenters suggested the park minimize prescribed burns near boundaries. Other commenters suggested cooperative fire prevention planning with adjacent landowners and the use of prescribed fire and thinning to achieve more natural habitat conditions.