



# United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY  
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Joe Manchin III  
Chairman, Committee on Energy  
and Natural Resources  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I hereby transmit the enclosed *Ocmulgee River Corridor Special Resource Study*. The study was conducted pursuant to Public Law 116-9, the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act, which authorized the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a special resource study of the Ocmulgee River corridor between the cities of Macon and Hawkinsville, Georgia, for potential inclusion as a new unit of the National Park System. The study area covers approximately 50 river miles and 120,000 river-adjacent acres. The study was conducted by the National Park Service (NPS).

Section 100507 of Title 54, United States Code, establishes the criteria to be considered in the study of an area for potential inclusion in the National Park System. To be recommended as a new unit, a study area must possess nationally significant natural or cultural resources and, in addition, represent one of the most important examples of a particular resource type in the country, be suitable and feasible for addition to the National Park System, and be appropriate for direct NPS management. Ultimately, units in the National Park System are designated by acts of Congress. A special resource study describes the resource conditions, and stakeholder perspectives at the time of the study. It serves as one of many reference and information sources for Congress and those interested in the potential designation of an area in the National Park System.

Land within the approximately 120,000-acre study area is currently owned by the State of Georgia, the U.S. government, numerous private individuals, corporations, and the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge occupies 7,764 acres in the northern portion of the study area. Robins Air Force Base lies south and west of the Refuge. Land use within and surrounding the study area is a mixture of public, commercial, industrial, residential, and agricultural. The Ocmulgee River corridor includes exceptional cultural resources that display: (1) the area's role in developing the discipline of archeology through the New Deal federal work relief programs of the 1930s–1940s; (2) the area's continuing cultural importance to descendants of Creek people, who recognize the Ocmulgee River corridor as their traditional homeland; and (3) the area's precontact and ancestral Creek archeological sites, many of which were investigated during New Deal archeological projects, including the Mississippian period mounds at Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park. A diversity of vegetation communities exists in the area, including upland mixed hardwood-pine, bottomland hardwoods, tupelo gum swamp forests, creeks, tributaries, beaver swamps, and upland lakes. The study area also serves as an important wildlife corridor.

In evaluating national significance, the NPS determined that the resources associated with New Deal archeology within the study area are nationally significant for their association with the

professionalization of American archeology as part of national work relief programs during the 1930s and 1940s. Since these sites associated with New Deal archeology were fundamentally trying to understand the prehistory of the United States, these sites (and other associated sites within the study area) are also significant for their potential to advance understanding of Creek heritage, history, and identity. The NPS determined that only a very small portion of the study area, specifically, a small blackland prairie ecosystem, is nationally significant for natural resources. However, there are many natural resource functions of the larger habitat corridor that correlate to the cultural significance of the river corridor study area. Therefore, the study area's natural resources are inextricably bound to the area's cultural significance.

In evaluating suitability, the NPS determined, based on the combination of resource values in the Ocmulgee River corridor, that the study area is suitable for inclusion in the National Park System. The Ocmulgee River corridor has a combination of resource values that are not found in other national park units or comparably managed sites or protected for public enjoyment by other entities. Among these are habitat corridors, blackland prairies, New Deal archeological history, and the homelands of descendant Creek peoples.

In evaluating the feasibility criterion, the NPS found that while the general public and Tribal nations tended to support an NPS presence for management of the Ocmulgee River corridor, some public land managers and private landowners within the study area indicated a preference at the time of the study for continuing their current approach to resource management.

There are many challenges associated with 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 timbering. For these reasons and others, the study area did not meet the feasibility criterion at this time.

With respect to the need for NPS management, the study found that direct management by the NPS does not appear to be the most efficient or necessary strategy for conserving the river corridor and thus the study area did not meet this criterion for inclusion in the National Park System. Major portions of the study area are already managed for public use and conservation by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR). In addition, the NPS already has a substantial presence on the north end of the river corridor at Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park.

While the study area did not meet all the required criteria for a special resource study to recommend the addition of new units of the National Park System, being added as a unit to the National Park System is also only one of many options considered in the study for managing important resources within the study area. There are opportunities for existing entities including the NPS, FWS, Robins Air Force Base, and the Georgia DNR to cooperate with each other, Tribal nations, and private landowners to expand conservation and public enjoyment of the resources of the Ocmulgee River corridor. Under these models, existing land managers and private landowners would work together to further resource conservation in the corridor as authorized by law.

Another suggested alternative for management of the Ocmulgee River corridor is through partnership-based conservation. The NPS, through Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park, could provide conservation assistance and resource interpretation in a partnership approach whereby the collective land managers — including the Muscogee (Creek) Nation — would seek to identify similar goals and each manage in an effective manner to meet a shared vision. A partnership approach would be cost effective and enable partners to leverage existing resources, providing a

collective stewardship of the river corridor in a sustainable way. An approach that leverages partnerships could also be employed to address the interest of some stakeholders to consider a reduced area within the larger study area for protection. Such an approach could provide additional partner support and resources to mitigate many of the concerns that led to a negative finding for the feasibility criterion in the study at this time.

In addition to partnership management, pursuing National Heritage Area (NHA), National Historic Landmark, National Natural Landmark, and/or Wild and Scenic River status would provide added recognition (and potentially support for conservation) of the area's resources. These programs can also offer technical assistance and grant opportunities for resources not directly managed by the NPS. A NHA designation could be considered through a feasibility study, and if designated by Congress, could be a particularly useful tool in the conservation and management needs of the river corridor. NHAs can provide financial and technical assistance to public and private landowners, potentially incentivizing conservation efforts among private owners. If desired, the Muscogee (Creek) Nation could serve as a coordinating entity for a NHA or as a member of its governing board. NHA feasibility studies apply a different set of criteria than a special resource study; conducting one would require additional analysis and public comment. However, reliance on information presented in the special resource study could reduce the cost and time needed to complete such an evaluation.

Given the national significance of the cultural resources and the combination of resource values in the Ocmulgee River corridor, the National Park Service stands ready to work with Congress to ensure that these resources can be appropriately and best protected.

Thank you for your interest in the National Park Service. A similar letter is being sent to the Honorable John Barrasso, Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, United States Senate; the Honorable Bruce Westerman, Chairman, Committee on Natural Resources, U.S. House of Representatives; and the Honorable Raúl Grijalva, Ranking Member, Committee on Natural Resources, U.S. House of Representatives. The affected members of the Georgia delegation will also receive a copy of the study report and this letter.

Sincerely,

Shannon A. Estenoz  
Assistant Secretary  
for Fish and Wildlife and Parks

Enclosure

cc: The Honorable Jon Ossoff  
The Honorable Raphael Warnock  
The Honorable Sanford Bishop (GA-2)  
The Honorable Austin Scott (GA-8)



# United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY  
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable John Barrasso  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Barrasso:

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Land within the approximately 120,000-acre study area is currently owned by the State of Georgia, the U.S. government, numerous private individuals, corporations, and the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge occupies 7,764 acres in the northern portion of the study area. Robins Air Force Base lies south and west of the Refuge. Land use within and surrounding the study area is a mixture of public, commercial, industrial, residential, and agricultural. The Ocmulgee River corridor includes exceptional cultural resources that display: (1) the area's role in developing the discipline of archeology through the New Deal federal work relief programs of the 1930s–1940s; (2) the area's continuing cultural importance to descendants of Creek people, who recognize the Ocmulgee River corridor as their traditional homeland; and (3) the area's precontact and ancestral Creek archeological sites, many of which were investigated during New Deal archeological projects, including the Mississippian period mounds at Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park. A diversity of vegetation communities exists in the area, including upland mixed hardwood-pine, bottomland hardwoods, tupelo gum swamp forests, creeks, tributaries, beaver swamps, and upland lakes. The study area also serves as an important wildlife corridor.

In evaluating national significance, the NPS determined that the resources associated with New Deal archeology within the study area are nationally significant for their association with the

professionalization of American archeology as part of national work relief programs during the 1930s and 1940s. Since these sites associated with New Deal archeology were fundamentally trying to understand the prehistory of the United States, these sites (and other associated sites within the study area) are also significant for their potential to advance understanding of Creek heritage, history, and identity. The NPS determined that only a very small portion of the study area, specifically, a small blackland prairie ecosystem, is nationally significant for natural resources. However, there are many natural resource functions of the larger habitat corridor that correlate to the cultural significance of the river corridor study area. Therefore, the study area's natural resources are inextricably bound to the area's cultural significance.

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In evaluating the feasibility criterion, the NPS found that while the general public and Tribal nations tended to support an NPS presence for management of the Ocmulgee River corridor, some public land managers and private landowners within the study area indicated a preference at the time of the study for continuing their current approach to resource management.

There are many challenges associated with 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 timbering. For these reasons and others, the study area did not meet the feasibility criterion at this time.

With respect to the need for NPS management, the study found that direct management by the NPS does not appear to be the most efficient or necessary strategy for conserving the river corridor and thus the study area did not meet this criterion for inclusion in the National Park System. Major portions of the study area are already managed for public use and conservation by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR). In addition, the NPS already has a substantial presence on the north end of the river corridor at Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park.

While the study area did not meet all the required criteria for a special resource study to recommend the addition of new units of the National Park System, being added as a unit to the National Park System is also only one of many options considered in the study for managing important resources within the study area. There are opportunities for existing entities including the NPS, FWS, Robins Air Force Base, and the Georgia DNR to cooperate with each other, Tribal nations, and private landowners to expand conservation and public enjoyment of the resources of the Ocmulgee River corridor. Under these models, existing land managers and private landowners would work together to further resource conservation in the corridor as authorized by law.

Another suggested alternative for management of the Ocmulgee River corridor is through partnership-based conservation. The NPS, through Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park, could provide conservation assistance and resource interpretation in a partnership approach whereby the collective land managers — including the Muscogee (Creek) Nation — would seek to identify similar goals and each manage in an effective manner to meet a shared vision. A partnership approach would be cost effective and enable partners to leverage existing resources, providing a

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Sincerely,

Shannon A. Estenoz  
Assistant Secretary  
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Enclosure

cc: The Honorable Jon Ossoff  
The Honorable Raphael Warnock  
The Honorable Sanford Bishop (GA-2)  
The Honorable Austin Scott (GA-8)



# United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY  
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Bruce Westerman  
Chairman, Committee on Natural Resources  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

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Land within the approximately 120,000-acre study area is currently owned by the State of Georgia, the U.S. government, numerous private individuals, corporations, and the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge occupies 7,764 acres in the northern portion of the study area. Robins Air Force Base lies south and west of the Refuge. Land use within and surrounding the study area is a mixture of public, commercial, industrial, residential, and agricultural. The Ocmulgee River corridor includes exceptional cultural resources that display: (1) the area's role in developing the discipline of archeology through the New Deal federal work relief programs of the 1930s–1940s; (2) the area's continuing cultural importance to descendants of Creek people, who recognize the Ocmulgee River corridor as their traditional homeland; and (3) the area's precontact and ancestral Creek archeological sites, many of which were investigated during New Deal archeological projects, including the Mississippian period mounds at Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park. A diversity of vegetation communities exists in the area, including upland mixed hardwood-pine, bottomland hardwoods, tupelo gum swamp forests, creeks, tributaries, beaver swamps, and upland lakes. The study area also serves as an important wildlife corridor.

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In evaluating the feasibility criterion, the NPS found that while the general public and Tribal nations tended to support an NPS presence for management of the Ocmulgee River corridor, some public land managers and private landowners within the study area indicated a preference at the time of the study for continuing their current approach to resource management.

There are many challenges associated with 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 timbering. For these reasons and others, the study area did not meet the feasibility criterion at this time.

With respect to the need for NPS management, the study found that direct management by the NPS does not appear to be the most efficient or necessary strategy for conserving the river corridor and thus the study area did not meet this criterion for inclusion in the National Park System. Major portions of the study area are already managed for public use and conservation by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR). In addition, the NPS already has a substantial presence on the north end of the river corridor at Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park.

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Sincerely,

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Enclosure

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# United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY  
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Raúl M. Grijalva  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Natural Resources  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Grijalva:

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