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Guest writer

Gauntlet thrown

Committed to aiding environment

FRENCH HILL

SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE



Dear Richard Mason: In your opinion piece of Nov. 25, you referenced my House-passed measure to add national forest land to Flatside Wilderness (HR5636, the Flat-side Wilderness Enhancement Act). I have spent over two years working with our state, county, conservation groups, U.S. Forest Service (USFS) staff, and with the appropriate congressional committees to consider enhancement strategies for Flatside.

Your sarcastic piece ignores three important aspects to my efforts to work with our Ouachita National Forest to enhance the Flatside Wilderness Area:

1. The acreage referenced will permanently be considered wilderness within the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS), thereby enhancing the area and clarifying forest management planning for the Ouachita Forest staff.
2. My original bill as introduced directs the USFS to study additional acres along the northern edge of the existing Flatside area for further inclusion into NWPS. Congressional committees argued that this be a separate effort. Therefore, Sen. John Boozman has been very helpful in working on this companion legislative measure in the Senate.
3. As introduced, my measure directed USFS to restore formerly privately owned loblolly pine plantations to native short-leaf pine. This will promote resiliency and facilitate more appropriate long-term conservation of the landscape. After discussions, USFS has agreed to pursue this effort without additional legislation.

Next, you criticized my vote to “put the gray wolf back on the path to extinction by removing it from the Endangered Species List.” This entirely mischaracterizes this bill. The Manage Our Wolves Act (HR6784) is a bipartisan bill that would accomplish what multiple administrations have been attempting to do for over a decade by delisting a species the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has deemed recovered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

In 2011, FWS proposed amending the historic range of the gray wolf, excluding parts or all of 29 eastern states from their previous approximation. FWS followed that proposal up in 2013, when it recognized the need for a change in historic determination during a comprehensive review of the issue. The Obama-era director of FWS made a strong case for delisting as “one of the spectacular successes of the ESA,” emphasizing the vital importance of state and tribal agencies to that success. He continued, pleading his

case for devoting FWS' limited resources toward the preservation and recovery of a truly endangered wolf species—the Mexican wolf.

Both in 2009 and 2014, the Fish and Wildlife Service attempted to delist the gray wolf due to unexpected increases in the species population but were met with litigation activities each time. I supported this bill to prevent the Fish and Wildlife Service from wasting further resources responding to environmental lawfare and to empower states to manage their individual wolf populations while providing needed certainty to species management plans.

Regarding Congressman Westerman's forestry bill (HR2936, the Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017), I did object to the language on the categorical exclusions for 10,000 acres and attempted to amend this language to better reflect conditions in different regions of the country. Unfortunately, my amendment was rejected. We must protect our forest resources and the public by doing a much better job—particularly in the West—in forest resource conservation. Congressman Westerman's bipartisan measure attempts to tackle this growing crisis. Hopefully, California will also respond with responsible zoning and permitting. Americans are building homes where they are not well situated from an environmental or safety point of view.

We agree on the fact that America's first national river, the Buffalo National River, is the ultimate icon of the Natural State. Protecting this watershed is vital for the ability of Arkansans and visitors to enjoy this beautiful free-flowing resource. As a paddler and hiker, I have enjoyed its peace and majesty for over 50 years. So naturally I object to the permitting of the large-scale hog farm in the Buffalo watershed. In my view, the ball was dropped in that permitting process by the state and federal governments. I was delighted to read recently that the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality denied an operating permit for the hog farm. I hope an equitable solution can be found for both the landowners and the watershed.

As to the future, I am pleased to see Gov. Asa Hutchinson act to focus on comprehensive state, federal, and private efforts to consider the Buffalo River watershed as a whole. Know that on Sept. 27, 2018, Congressman Womack and I sent a letter to the National Park Service to gain understanding of what water quality challenges it faces across the entire watershed and understand what data it has or requires supporting policy direction. You can locate this letter on my website at [Hill.House.Gov](http://hill.house.gov).

And you're right, "Of all things in this state that should be nonpartisan, the Buffalo National River should top any list." I couldn't agree more.

As an avid outdoorsman and conservationist, I will always fight to protect our state and nation's prized natural resources for future generations to enjoy. And I hope that you don't "bite nails," but continue to advocate for common-sense environmental policies.



U.S. Rep. French Hill represents Arkansas'

2nd District.