



FEBRUARY 14, 2024

Honorable Senator Joe Manchin III

Chairman
Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources
306 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Senator John Barrasso

Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources
307 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Senator Angus King, Jr.

Chairman
Subcommittee on National Parks
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
133 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Senator Steve Daines

Ranking Member
Subcommittee on National Parks
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
320 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Chairmen and Ranking Members,

We are writing to support the swift passage of legislation to create the Ocmulgee Mounds National Park and Preserve in the 118th Congress, to express gratitude for the federal efforts to meet this moment after almost a century of civic advocacy, and to acknowledge that we are committed to continuing to fulfill the vision of this Park and Preserve.

The Ocmulgee River is a special place, recognized by the National Park Service as one of America's most important and significant wildlife habitat corridors, tribally significant landscapes, and archaeological sites, now with the opportunity to create the first and only National Park and Preserve in Georgia. The legislation to create the Park and Preserve unit is carefully tailored to the recommendations of the National Park Service's Special Resource Study and has broad local support across varying fields, interests, and political ideologies.

Conserving the series of ecological and cultural assets as a National Park and Preserve is vital to the region. It will serve as a robust form of long term and stable economic development for the Middle Georgia region and enhance climate resilience for local ecosystems by preserving biodiversity hotspots, which are most effective in larger contiguous landscapes. In addition, the National Park and Preserve will offer an avenue for co-management between the tribal, state and federal land managers, and constitute one of the largest potential expansions of public hunting and fishing access in Georgia.

The Muscogee (Creek) Nation has been in consultation with the National Historical Park for years due to the significance of the ancestral sites inside the proposed boundary. But, as fellow landowners in the corridor with a long-standing commitment to the stewardship of the corridor, and with common practices of co-management at other units around the country, this Park and Preserve legislation would create a path toward co-management to be agreed upon by all land managers.

In addition to the Muscogee (Creek) cultural sites, the wildlife habitat along the Ocmulgee has also remained unspoiled. The opportunity for connectivity is uniquely possible because so many private and public parcels are already protected along the corridor. Included is the 6,500-acre Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, part of roughly 85,000 acres of contiguous swamp, the largest block of forested habitat in the upper coastal plain. The park sits on the banks of the Ocmulgee River on the Macon Plateau along the Fall Line, the edge of a prehistoric sea and geological boundary that separates the hills of the Piedmont and the flatlands of the Atlantic coastal plain.

Further, the economic impact of the park and preserve cannot be overstated. A study conducted by the National Parks Conservation Association concludes that the proposed National Park and Preserve will have a tremendous economic impact along the corridor. The study estimates that, over the course of 15 years, the region's municipalities can expect a collective increase in annual tax revenue of \$29.8 Million because of the projected \$206.7 Million of total economic activity generated from the Park and Preserve.

Lastly, one of the key economic engines of Middle Georgia is Robins Air Force Base (RAFB) in Warner Robins. This Park and Preserve will help improve quality of life for the communities housed on and off base in the region. It will also allow partners to put land along the Ocmulgee flood plain near the base into conservation, helping stave off encroachment into flight pattern areas. Future development in the areas east of the base threatens base operations with incompatible land use. Conserving undeveloped lands within the Ocmulgee River Corridor will help the base continue to fulfill our national security missions, which is vital to the economic vitality of the entire Middle Georgia region.

Land abutting Robins AFB is vacant and mostly undeveloped. Legislation creating the National Park and Preserve will potentially allow RAFB, and park partners to leverage the Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program to protect the environs inside their REPI boundary and inside the expanded Park and Preserve boundary. It is for this reason that the Sustainability Plan for RAFB formally recommends the creation of the National Park and Preserve.

As stewards of the corridor, it is up to us to fulfill the vision of a fully connected and conserved corridor, but we cannot continue to do so without swift federal action from Congress. That is why we strongly support the passage of federal legislation in the 118th Congress. Every year that goes by without action, we risk future development, lost cultural sites, and missed opportunities for significant economic development in the beloved region of Middle Georgia. As a region and partnership, we have been preparing for this moment and are ready to rise to the challenge of filling the proposed boundary.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "George Dusenbury". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "G" and a stylized "D".

George Dusenbury

VP of the Southeast