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For Immediate Release

Entire Arkansas Congressional delegation members release statements regarding US Fish and Wildlife Service's proposed critical habitat designation in Arkansas

(Info box / sidebar possibility): Arkansas State Sen. Missy Irvin (R, Mountain View), chair of the Senate Committee on City, County and Local, helped to schedule a combined joint hearing at 1 p.m. Tuesday in Room A of the MAC building on the matter with both City, County and Local committees and Agriculture, Forestry and Economic Development committees.

LITTLE ROCK — All of Arkansas' United States Congressional delegation members released statements today regarding the United States Fish And Wildlife Service's proposed critical habitat designation for the Neosho mucket and Rabbitsfoot mussels. The Service proposed 42 percent of Arkansas' geographical area as critical habitat which includes the watersheds associated with that critical habitat for the two mussels.

The Service extended public comment period for critical habitat designation after Sen. Mark Pryor (D) submitted a letter in May. The extension opened the door for the Association of Arkansas Counties along with several supporting organizations both in the public and private sectors to submit independent comments and local environmental and economic impact studies. The main goal of this public comment effort is to decrease the Service's overly broad geographical area being proposed as critical habitat. The decrease is based on sound science, adherence to the spirit of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA), and potential social and economic impacts to Arkansas. The effort suggested a 36-percent decrease in the proposed designation of critical habitat area.

These two species are among 46 Arkansas species that were listed as threatened or endangered under an agreement under the Endangered Species Act. The potential of more critical habitat designation in the state is evident.

Sen. Mark Pryor, D; Sen. John Boozman, R; Rep. Rick Crawford, R; Rep. Tim Griffin, R; Rep. Steve Womack, R; and Rep. Tom Cotton, R, all released statements against the Service's overly broad critical habitat designation in the Natural State.

Sen. Mark Pryor: "After hearing from Arkansans, I pressed the Fish and Wildlife Service for answers about their proposed critical habitat rule for two mussels. I wanted to ensure that Arkansans were able to weigh in on the negative economic impact this rule will have on our state's landowners, counties, and agriculture. The Fish and Wildlife Service needs to gather all the facts in order to fully understand the adverse economic impact, including the devastating effect it will have on landowners' ability to use their land. While I'm pleased Fish and Wildlife granted my request for an extension, the fight's not over yet. I'll continue to push to ensure Arkansas landowners have the freedom they deserve."

Sen. John Boozman: "Arkansas is facing this crisis because the Administration pursued a closed-door settlement agreement with activist organizations that want hundreds of new species listed. Now the agency is resisting transparency requests from Congress. Objections and concerns to the scope of this 'critical habitat' designation raised in public comments are serious and substantive, and they deserve the careful and prompt attention of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. I will work with the Arkansas Congressional delegation and use my position as the Ranking Member on the Subcommittee on Water and Wildlife to hold the Service's feet-to-the-fire on this issue. Arkansans deserve to be treated fairly by federal government agencies. Openness and transparency are a must."

Rep. Rick Crawford: "Simply put, the overreaching critical habitat designation for the Neosho Mucket and Rabbitsfoot mussels is a job killer in Arkansas. The federal government cannot continue to hide behind the Endangered Species Act, pushing an environmental agenda and expanding far beyond the original intent of the law at

the expense of Arkansas families and job creators. Placing the welfare of mollusks over the good of everyday Arkansans who are still working hard just to make ends meet reveals a complete disregard for common sense warranting strong oversight and action. I look forward to representing the voice of the people of Arkansas in this matter."

Rep. Tim Griffin: "While we must be good stewards of the environment, including endangered species, I oppose this Washington-knows-best designation that would tie up nearly half of Arkansas in red tape and bureaucracy, potentially affecting paychecks and jobs for thousands of families."

Rep. Steve Womack: "Instead of pushing another unwanted and unnecessary environmental mandate on the state, the federal government should fully vet the real, significant repercussions this overreaching designation will have on Arkansas and our economy. Doing so will surely provide more than enough reason to reduce, if not eliminate, this job-killing habitat designation."

Rep. Tom Cotton: "Most Arkansans agree we should protect and preserve our environment; but we must do so sensibly, in a way that also protects taxpayers and jobs. This designation needlessly hinders our economic growth and hurts Arkansas families."

Background

About 1/3 of Arkansas private landowners face federal restrictions on land due to this overly broad critical habitat designation by the federal government.

The AAC and 10 other organizations collectively submitted comments to the Service that included independent environmental studies conducted by GBMc & Associates, an environmental services company, and Histecon Associates, Inc., in Little Rock, conducted the economic impact studies while the firm Gill Ragon Owen P.A. submitted the final comments for submission to the USFWS.

Members of this effort for responsible critical habitat designation in Arkansas include:

Association of Arkansas Counties; Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce; Arkansas Environmental Federation; Arkansas Forestry Association; Arkansas Farm Bureau; Arkansas Poultry Federation; Arkansas Independent Producers and Royalty Owners; Camp Ozark; Energy and Environmental Alliance of Arkansas; Arkansas Cattlemen's Association; and Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts.

In total Arkansas is faced with an additional 42 potential listings in the next several years. All of which were a part of a settlement agreement with environmentalists where the affected public had no input or knowledge the settlement was occurring.

The local environmental studies found that many areas that have been proposed for critical habitat designation have no recent occurrences of the target species and

there is insufficient information to determine the area is essential for conversation of the species. Furthermore, in some instances the USFWS designated entire stream and river reaches in the critical habitat area when this approach is not consistent with the requirements for designation of critical habitat under the ESA.