



ARKANSAS DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURE

**BUFFALO RIVER CONSERVATION COMMITTEE
2024 ANNUAL REPORT**



CONTENTS

Background -----	3
Buffalo River Watershed Overview -----	4
Funding and Achievements -----	6
Unpaved Roads -----	9
Cost Share Programs for Agriculture -----	11
Water and Wastewater Infrastructure-----	15
Tourism and Tourism Impacts -----	17
Appendices	
Appendix A – Timeline of Efforts -----	18
Appendix B – Federal Partner Updates -----	22
Appendix C – Project Map-----	25

Respectfully submitted to:

The Honorable Sarah Huckabee Sanders, Governor
Co-Chairs of the Arkansas Legislative Council

Prepared by:

The Arkansas Department of Agriculture with support from Buffalo River Conservation Committee members

BUFFALO RIVER CONSERVATION COMMITTEE (BRCC) 2024 ANNUAL REPORT

BACKGROUND

On September 30, 2016, Governor Asa Hutchinson created the Beautiful Buffalo River Action Committee (BBRAC) to develop an Arkansas-led approach to identify and to address potential concerns in the Buffalo River Watershed. In its creation, Governor Hutchinson directed the BBRAC to initiate the development of a non-regulatory, Buffalo River Watershed Management Plan (WMP).

Beginning in December 2016, four stakeholder meetings were facilitated as part of the development of the voluntary, non-regulatory WMP for the Buffalo River Watershed. Stakeholders in attendance included farmers, landowners, political representatives, state and federal agencies, and interest groups representing agriculture, conservation, and recreation.

The Buffalo River WMP is a voluntary, non-regulatory, nonpoint source WMP consisting of nine elements. The WMP identified six sub-watersheds as priority areas: Mill Creek (upper), Calf Creek, Bear Creek, Brush Creek, Tomahawk Creek, and Big Creek (lower). It does not include regulated facilities or encompass any management practices for regulated facilities. The Buffalo River WMP was fully accepted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on June 5, 2018, and can be found [here](#).

On September 23, 2019, Governor Hutchinson signed Executive Order 19-14 establishing the Buffalo River Conservation Committee (BRCC) which replaced the Beautiful Buffalo River Action Committee (BBRAC).

The BRCC membership consisted of the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture; Secretary of the Department of Energy and Environment; Secretary of the Department of Health; and Secretary of the Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism.

Executive Order 19-14 required the members of the BRCC to work in cooperation with one another to identify opportunities to leverage their departments' unique expertise, relationships, focus areas, and funding mechanisms in support of the vitality of the watershed.

The BRCC was also required to establish subcommittees that include key stakeholders representing local landowners, conservation organizations, environmental and technical experts, representatives of the tourism industry, county and municipal officials, and federal partners. The subcommittees were directed to identify opportunities for training, relationship building, and specific projects, all of which will be in service to preserving and enhancing water quality within the Buffalo River Watershed.

On November 15, 2019, following approval by the Arkansas Legislative Council, \$1 million from the Governor's discretionary fund was transferred to an Arkansas Department of Agriculture fund account to support grants and projects within the Buffalo River Watershed. An additional \$1 million contribution was pledged by private donors in support of the Buffalo River Watershed Enhancement Project, a regional project funded in part through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Regional Conservation Partnership Program. The project is discussed further on page 8.

In 2021, the Arkansas General Assembly took action through Act 785 of the 2021 Regular Session to codify the BRCC at Arkansas Code 15-23-1001 et seq. The legislation became effective July 28, 2021.

just before joining the White River. The upper section of the river in the Ozark National Forest is managed by the U.S. Forest Service and is designated as a National Scenic River and a National Wild River; that section is not part of the area managed as a park by the National Park Service.

The Buffalo River was designated as the nation's first National River by an Act of Congress on March 1, 1972, through Public Law 92-237. The designation ended the recurring plans of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to construct one or more dams on the river. The National River designation protects natural rivers from industrial uses, impoundments, and other obstructions that may change the natural character of the river or disrupt the natural habitat for the flora and fauna that live in or near the river. Three segments totaling 11,978 acres (48.47 km²) were designated as Buffalo National River Wilderness in 1975.

Approximately 60 percent of the land within the Buffalo River Watershed is privately owned. Federal ownership accounts for approximately 37 percent, and three percent of the watershed is owned by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.

The Buffalo River Watershed includes 2,518 miles of roads, with 2,007 miles or 80 percent being unpaved. The majority of unpaved roads are found in two counties; Newton County has 885 miles of unpaved roads and Searcy County has 834 miles. There are 668 points within the watershed where an unpaved road crosses a stream.

Approximately 1,245 miles or 62 percent of unpaved roads in the watershed are under county jurisdiction. Approximately 630 miles or 31 percent of unpaved roads are privately owned. Federal ownership accounts for 120 miles or six percent of the unpaved roads.

Twenty-four public water systems operate within the Buffalo River Watershed; however, none use the Buffalo River as a water source. The Arkansas Department of Energy and Environment's Division of Environmental Quality has issued permits for four wastewater systems within the watershed: the City of Jasper, the City of Marshall, the Buffalo River National Park, and the Marble Falls Suburban Improvement District.

Agriculture and tourism are significant industries within the nine counties that contain a portion of the Buffalo River Watershed. Agriculture is Arkansas's largest industry, followed by the tourism industry. Agriculture contributes more than \$24.3 billion to the state's economy and provides one of every seven jobs in the state. Tourism has a \$9.9 billion impact statewide, including \$806 million in state and local taxes.

There are 5,882 farms on 1,398,799 acres in the region, including 239,233 harvested cropland acres. Poultry, cattle, and hay are the top three agricultural commodities produced in the region. A variety of other agricultural commodities, including pork, vegetables, melons, potatoes, sweet potatoes, fruits, tree nuts, and berries, are also produced in the area. Based on the most recent U.S. Department of Agriculture data, the market value of the area's farm products is nearly \$1.1 billion. Agritourism is expanding within the watershed, providing additional jobs and income for farms and agriculture-related venues.

Approximately 79 percent of the watershed is forested, and 14 percent is grassland. The forest type group is classified as predominately Oak-Hickory with some Oak-Pine. The collective land cover contains

18.3 million tons of standing pine and more than 126 million tons of standing hardwood. The forest industry provides more than 1,000 jobs in the region.

The Buffalo National River serves as a substantial tourist attraction for Arkansas. The Buffalo National River draws an estimated 1.2 million visitors annually, making it one of Arkansas’s most popular amenities. These visitors spend an estimated \$55 million in the region, providing income for business operators, creating jobs, and generating local taxes.

More economic and land use data to include information about unpaved roads within the Buffalo River Watershed can be found at agriculture.arkansas.gov/buffalo-river-conservation-committee/.

FUNDING AND ACHIEVEMENTS

In November 2019, the Arkansas Legislative Council approved providing \$1 million from the Governor’s discretionary fund for the Buffalo River Conservation Committee (BRCC). The BRCC and subcommittee members selected four topic areas as the focus of the BRCC’s actions and funding: unpaved roads, cost-share programs for agriculture, water and wastewater system infrastructure, and tourism and tourism impacts.

The BRCC has approved funding for the following projects:

Cane Branch Unpaved Road, Searcy County	\$124,807
Cave Mountain Unpaved Road, Newton County	\$376,496
City of Jasper Water Treatment Facility Improvements	\$250,000
Town of Gilbert Dark-Sky Streetlight Conversion	\$11,600
U.S. Geological Survey Water Study	\$89,960.50
U.S. Department of Agriculture Feral Hog Eradication Efforts	\$74,960.50
Greater Searcy County Chamber of Commerce Tree Planting Project	\$2,500
H2Ozarks’ Mill Creek Sub-Watershed Project	\$69,676
Total	\$1,000,000

A summary and status report for each funded project is provided below:

- Cane Branch Road, Searcy County: \$124,807 (Completed October 2021)

The BRCC approved \$124,807 towards the total estimated cost of \$231,935 for the Cane Branch Road project, an unpaved road project in Searcy County that includes the installation of cross pipes, ditch reshaping, water diversion, and grade breaks over 7/10 of a mile to reduce road erosion and the resulting transport of sediment and stone. Ditch runoff from the project site directly impacts the Buffalo River.

The Arkansas Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Division pledged \$55,132 for the project from the federal Nonpoint Source Management Program.

In November 2020, \$124,807 of BRCC funding was disbursed to Searcy County to begin work on the Cane Branch Road project. A construction bid was awarded in April 2021 and the project was completed in October 2021 for a total cost of \$249,615. The final site inspection occurred on October 21, 2021, and all remaining funding was disbursed. The Natural Resources Division

contributed \$69,676 from Unpaved Roads Program funds towards the final project cost, bringing the total contribution from the Natural Resources Division to \$124,808.

- Cave Mountain Road (Hawksbill Crag), Newton County: \$376,496 (Ongoing)

The BRCC approved \$342,269 towards the total estimated cost of \$397,400 for the Cave Mountain Road project, a two-mile unpaved road project on one of the most heavily traveled roads in the Buffalo River Watershed due to the popularity of Hawksbill Crag as a tourist destination. The project includes the removal of trees, installation of cross pipes, enhancement of the road base, and installation of guard rails.

The Arkansas Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Division pledged \$55,131 for the project from the federal Nonpoint Source Management Program.

Tree removal and disposal began on the Cave Mountain Road project in the fall of 2020 after completion of an environmental assessment that was required by the National Environmental Policy Act because the road crosses National Park Service property. After completion of the environmental assessment, a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was announced by the National Park Service on August 19, 2022, which allowed construction to proceed but with construction stipulations to avoid disturbance of endangered species. Funding of \$215,814 was disbursed in November 2022.

- City of Jasper Wastewater Treatment Facility Improvements: \$250,000 (Substantially Complete)

The City of Jasper's existing wastewater treatment facility discharges into the Little Buffalo River approximately six miles upstream from its confluence with the Buffalo River. Necessary improvements to the wastewater treatment facility include a new sludge processing facility that would house a sludge press and associated chemical feed equipment, site pump station improvements, new flow equalization basin, and general site plumbing rehabilitation.

The BRCC approved \$250,000 to work in conjunction with a \$440,000 loan and a \$1,351,750 loan with principal forgiveness from the Arkansas Clean Water State Revolving Loan Fund approved for the City of Jasper by the Arkansas Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Commission in 2020. The loans were approved in June 2021 and the contract for Phase I of the project was awarded. Construction began in September 2021 on the pump station.

Numerous issues have been encountered over the course of the Jasper project that have delayed construction and increased project costs. Issues included weather challenges and identification of poor conditions that hinder construction. The installation of reinforced concrete piers was completed in August 2023 and additional concrete work was conducted in September. All BRCC funding for the project has been disbursed.

Work on this project is approximately 98 percent complete. The lift station is in place and pumping, with some final work anticipated to complete in summer to fall of 2024 with final completion anticipated by the end of CY 2024.

- Town of Gilbert Dark-Sky Streetlight Conversion Project: \$11,600 (Completed October 2022)

The funding approved by the BRCC was used to purchase and install 16 modern zero up-light LED fixtures to replace existing outdated lights. The new lights shine the minimum of biologically impactful blue light and assist the town with being recognized as a Dark-Sky Town. The project was completed on October 14, 2022, and all funding was expended.

- U.S. Geological Survey Filamentous Algae Study: \$89,960.50 (Ongoing)

The BRCC provided \$65,000 to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) in 2021 to complete the fourth year of a five-year study to determine why filamentous algae is increasing in the Buffalo River. Sampling for filamentous algae was conducted from 2021 to July 2022.

In 2022, the BRCC approved \$24,960.50 in additional funding to enable the USGS to continue monitoring nutrients and filamentous algae at two dozen sites along 70 miles of the Buffalo River for six additional months during a funding gap. BRCC funds were used for three additional rounds of field data collection and laboratory analysis in July, September, and December of 2022. The USGS received additional funding from the USGS National Resource Preservation Program to continue data collection through late 2023.

- U.S. Department of Agriculture Feral Hog Eradication Project: \$74,960.50 (Completed September 2022)

The BRCC approved \$24,960.50 in 2022 as additional funding for feral hog eradication work by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service Wildlife Services (Wildlife Services) in the Buffalo River Watershed. The funding will enable Wildlife Services to continue the feral hog eradication efforts that were funded with \$50,000 from the BRCC in 2021.

Funds were dispersed to Wildlife Services in June 2022. The funds have been used to purchase a thermal camera, additional traps, and additional trap parts. Between October 1, 2019, and November 1, 2022, Wildlife Services personnel worked with 70 private landowners within the Buffalo River Watershed and removed 1,201 feral hogs.

- Greater Searcy County Chamber of Commerce Tree Planting Project: \$2,500 (Completed December 2021)

In 2021, the BRCC provided \$2,500 to the Greater Searcy County Chamber of Commerce to purchase trees to be given to Searcy County residents and be planted in public areas within the county. The Nature Conservancy of Arkansas pledged to match the funding, bringing the total to \$5,000 for the project.

Four large sugar maple trees were planted at the Berry Shed property owned by Searcy County. Thirty-three additional trees were planted at Raccoon Springs City Park, including 23 trees purchased with funding provided by the BRCC and 10 trees donated by the Arkansas Department of Agriculture's Urban Forestry Program. The project was completed in December 2021.

- Mill Creek Sub-Watershed Partnership Building, Landowner Engagement, and Water Quality Monitoring

The BRCC approved \$69,676 on October 31, 2023, for the Mill Creek Sub-Watershed Project submitted by H2Ozarks. The goals of the project include improving water quality in Mill Creek, a headwater tributary impacting water quality in the Buffalo River. The project also includes landowner engagement and identifying program partners and collaborators. Funds were disbursed in November 2023.

H2Ozarks announced a series of four landowner workshops utilizing BRCC funding. Workshops focused on riparian buffer management, forest management, maximizing pasture nutrient efficiency, and overall pasture and forage management. The workshops were scheduled for September 12 and 24 and October 8 and 24, 2024.

OTHER PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES IN THE BUFFALO RIVER WATERSHED

In addition to the projects funded by the Buffalo River Conservation Committee (BRCC), many other important projects and activities within the BRCC's four focus areas were conducted by subcommittee members, partners, and stakeholders within the Buffalo River Watershed in 2023. An update on a few of these projects and activities is provided below:

Unpaved Roads

- Richland Road Unpaved Road Project in Searcy County

In 2020, Searcy County was selected to receive funding of \$47,408 through the traditional Arkansas Unpaved Roads Program for improvements to a portion of Richland Road. Searcy County committed to providing \$53,380 in matching funds for the project. The project, including the installation of ditch outlets, cross pipes, and slope improvement, was completed in October 2022.

Searcy County submitted an Arkansas Unpaved Roads Program application for 2023 funding to complete Phase II of the Richland Road project. The total project cost is estimated at \$108,236, with \$51,056 being requested as grant funding. The project will span 1.5 miles and install seven culverts, improve ditches and ditch outlets, road base improvements, and improve storm water management to reduce sediment inputs to the Buffalo River. Searcy County completed this project in October 2024.

- Unpaved Roads along Cave Creek in Newton County

Two unpaved road projects on Cave Creek in Newton County have been funded by the Arkansas Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Division through a Nonpoint Source Pollution grant awarded to The Nature Conservancy for unpaved road improvements throughout the state.

The first project is for improvements to County Road 252 in the Gene Rush Wildlife Management Area managed by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. The Nature Conservancy sub-awarded \$100,000 to Newton County for construction of a 100 ft. span that

will replace undersized culverts. Newton County will provide over \$150,000 of cash and in-kind costs. The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission provided \$30,000 for materials.

The second project is to improve access and road conditions at County Road 5070 in Newton County. The project will replace undersized culverts with a 28 ft. by 100 ft. span and improve unpaved approaches. Newton County will provide \$176,847 to match \$140,346 in federal funding provided by the Natural Resources Division. An initial disbursement was made in November 2022. This project was completed in September 2024.



Before



After

The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, The Nature Conservancy, Newton County, and the Natural Resources Division are also exploring the feasibility of improving a crossing on Newton County Road 4845. Improvement of this stream crossing would make Cave Creek a free-flowing tributary to the Buffalo River.

Cost-Share Programs for Agriculture

Additional projects implemented in support of the implementation of the Buffalo River Watershed Management Plan include:

- Arkansas Nonpoint Source Pollution Grant Sub-Award 19-500 Buffalo River Water Quality Monitoring

The primary objective of this project is to measure water quality parameters (Total Suspended Solids, Turbidity, Dissolved Oxygen, pH, Nitrate, Nitrite, Orthophosphate, Total Nitrogen, Total Phosphorus) in the Calf Creek (110100050401), Brush Creek (110100050405), Tomahawk Creek (110100050407), and Bears Outlet Creek (110100050404) sub-watersheds as these are part of the Buffalo National River and are recognized as an Extraordinary Resource Waterway and were identified in the Buffalo River Watershed Management Plan. Arkansas State University was awarded \$386,322 of federal funding and provided \$301,898 in match for a project total of \$688,220. Arkansas State University completed this project in June of 2023.

- Arkansas Nonpoint Source Pollution Grant Sub-Award 20-400 Crooked Creek Conservation District: Buffalo River Watershed Project

The primary objective of the project was to maintain and/or restore all designated uses of the Buffalo River Watershed through:

1. Implementation of a program that could provide assistance and funding to landowners and land users for voluntary best management practices (BMPs).
2. Development and implementation of 200 conservation plans on 61,000 acres of pastureland and 7.25 miles of stream bank protection in the Buffalo River Watershed. Conservation plans for local producers and cost assistance for BMP implementation resulted in the establishment of vegetative cover on the pastureland and maintenance and protection of riparian areas through installation of livestock exclusion fencing.
3. Installation of demonstration rain gardens to reduce runoff by using different methods and materials such as grasses, native plants, perennial flowers, etc.

Total project cost is \$459,500, of which \$256,000 were federal funds and \$203,500 were non-federal funds provided by the Crooked Creek Conservation District and landowner contributions. This project was completed in October 2024.

- Arkansas Nonpoint Source Pollution Grant Sub-Award 21-700 Buffalo Conservation District: Buffalo River Tributary Project

The primary objective of this project is to implement a program that will encourage voluntary participation of landowners and operators in applying BMPs within sub-watersheds (11010005) that contain or feed the Buffalo River. The project would like to see implementation of BMPs on 70,731 acres of pastureland within these waterways resulting in: 1) a reduction of nutrients, sediment, and bacteria entering waterways by establishing alternative water sources and filter strips; 2) nutrient management and intensive grazing systems in pastures; 3) protection of riparian areas through livestock exclusion fencing. The Natural Resources Division awarded \$62,857 of federal funds to the district's \$2,876. Additionally, \$75,000 of federal funds were awarded to match \$112,500 of landowner contributions for conservation practice cost share. The total project cost is \$253,233. This project is scheduled to be complete by end of the 2024 calendar year.

- Buffalo River Watershed Enhancement Project

This project was approved in April 2020 for \$2.7 million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). Local partners, including The Nature Conservancy, Arkansas Department of Agriculture, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, Buffalo River Foundation, and the Buffalo River Conservation District, provided additional funding of approximately \$2.76 million. The funding is to be used for projects that aim to improve water quality by reducing sediment and nutrient loads through improving pasture management, reducing erosion from unpaved roads, and restoring riparian corridors. All participation by landowners is completely voluntary.

In 2020, the Buffalo River Watershed was one of five watersheds included in a joint stewardship project between the U.S. Forest Service and NRCS. Objectives of the project include protection of water quality and supply for public drinking water, tourism, fisheries, and rural industrial development; improvement of forest health and resiliency; reduction of wildfire threats; improvement of wildlife habitat; and environmental education. Funding is provided by federal, state, and private sector sponsors to help private landowners install conservation practices.

Activities conducted through the Buffalo River Watershed Enhancement Project in 2024 include:

- 16 projects were contracted for more than 2,000 acres in the watershed.
- Projects include stream crossings, water management, tree and shrub establishment, stream bank protection, firebreaks, and prescribed fire.
- These contracts with private landowners have been approved by NRCS for a total of \$710,124.
- The contracts are awaiting completion of archaeological inspections before implementation.
- Fiscal year 2025 signup closed on November 22, 2024.
- Totals to date for the project include 68 contracts for a total of \$1,710,124. Fourteen of the contracts are with historically underserved participants for a total of \$365,982.

- Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership Program

Through the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership Program (Joint Chiefs'), the NRCS and the U.S. Forest Service provided more than \$2.3 million for a project in Arkansas to improve water quality. A portion of this funding is to be used within the Buffalo River Watershed to work with agricultural producers, forest landowners, and National Forest System lands to improve forest health using available Farm Bill conservation programs and others. All participation by landowners is completely voluntary.

The Joint Chiefs' project concluded on September 30, 2022.

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) is a conservation program administered by the NRCS to help farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners integrate conservation into working lands. The Arkansas Department of Agriculture's Forestry Division has a technical services agreement with the NRCS to develop forest management plans and forest practice plans for landowners.

Accomplishments within the Buffalo River Watershed through EQIP in 2024 include:

- 712.1 acres of prescribed burning implemented
- 4,981 feet of firebreak implemented
- 79 acres of forest stand improvement implemented
- 52.3 acres of prescribed grazing implemented
- 71,718 feet of fence implemented

- U.S. Forest Service Forest Stewardship Program

The Forest Stewardship Program of the U.S. Forest Service works in partnership with state forestry agencies, cooperative extension, and conservation districts to connect private landowners with information and tools they need to manage their forests and woodlands, primarily through the development of forest stewardship plans.

Accomplishments within the Buffalo River Watershed through the Forest Stewardship Program in 2024 include:

- Three new Forest Stewardship plans were completed for 878 acres.
- The Arkansas Department of Agriculture's Forestry Division provided forest management technical assistance to 27 landowners for 659 acres.

- U.S. Forest Service Cross Boundary Wildfire Mitigation Program

The Cross Boundary Wildfire Mitigation Program, formerly known as the Community Fire Protection or Stevens Program, provides assistance for fire protection and fuels reduction. Non-industrial private landowners are eligible for prescribed burns at no cost within 10 miles of the national forest system lands.

Accomplishments within the Buffalo River Watershed through the Cross Boundary Wildfire Mitigation Program in 2024 include:

- The Arkansas Department of Agriculture's Forestry Division completed four prescribed burns for a total of 177 acres.

- U.S. Forest Service Volunteer Fire Assistance Grant Program

The Volunteer Fire Assistance Grant, funded through the U.S. Forest Service and administered in Arkansas by the Arkansas Department of Agriculture's Forestry Division, is used to purchase fire suppression kits for volunteer fire departments. The kits contain equipment and gear necessary for the safe suppression of wildfires.

In 2024, wildfire suppression kits were awarded to the following volunteer fire departments within the Buffalo National River Watershed:

- Mount Judea, Newton County
- Parthenon, Newton County
- Leslie, Searcy County

Water and Wastewater System Infrastructure

- Marble Falls Sewer Improvement District No. 1

The Marble Falls wastewater treatment plant does not operate well due to it being sized for a time when there was a larger community and a fully functioning amusement park at Dogpatch. The outfall for this facility discharges into a creek that eventually leads to the Buffalo River.

During the summer of 2021, Bass Pro founder, Johnny Morris, bought the former Dogpatch property for development as the Marble Falls Nature Park. An application for funding assistance for improvements to the wastewater treatment facility to serve the needs of the community and proposed new development was approved by the Arkansas Natural Resources Commission in December 2021. The commission approved a grant of \$1 million and a loan of \$609,614 for the project.

Engineering work is being completed on schedule and reappointments to the Board of Commissioners for the Marble Falls Water, Sewer, and Solid Waste Disposal Suburban Improvement District No. 1 are complete. Public hearings on the issuance of the bond required for loan closing were held in Newton County and Boone County on November 2, 2022. The preliminary design is complete and is awaiting approval by the Arkansas Department of Health.

- City of Marshall Water System

The Arkansas Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Commission approved a total funding amount of \$2,095,675 for the City of Marshall through two separate loans with principal forgiveness in 2015 and 2020 from the Arkansas Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Fund. The funds were provided to rehabilitate the city's water mains and reduce water loss in its water distribution system. The project was completed in November 2020.

- Septic Tank Remediation Program

The Septic Tank Remediation Program officially kicked off the Buffalo River Watershed addition on September 9, 2022. As of September 30, 2024, 15 projects were completed in the Buffalo River Watershed totaling \$230,236.

- American Rescue Plan Act

Governor Asa Hutchinson established the America Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Steering Committee through Executive Order 21-08 to make recommendations on the best use of ARPA funding provided to the state. In June of 2021, the Working Group for Water and Other Infrastructure Projects was formed to make a recommendation to the ARPA steering committee.

The working group conducted an extensive assessment of drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater needs across the state. Based on over 1,400 responses, overall water infrastructure needs of \$5.2 billion were identified. On August 31, 2021, the working group submitted a final report to the ARPA Steering Committee. A timeline, eligibility requirements, and scoring criteria were also developed and included in the report.

On July 27, 2022, the House and Senate City, County and Local Affairs Committees met to hear statewide water and wastewater needs, and the Arkansas Department of Agriculture’s proposed ARPA funding plan.

On August 18, 2022, the ARPA Steering Committee approved \$270 million to the Arkansas Department of Agriculture for water, wastewater, and stormwater projects and \$10 million for irrigation projects. After approval by the PEER Committee on September 13, 2022, the Arkansas Legislative Council approved the full \$270 million for water, wastewater, and stormwater projects to be administered by the Arkansas Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Division on September 16, 2022.

The Arkansas Natural Resources Commission approved distributing \$270 million of ARPA funding to 156 projects across the state in 58 counties on December 2, 2022. The following projects within the Buffalo River Watershed were awarded funding:

City of Jasper Water System Improvements	\$1,935,000.00
City of Jasper Wastewater Treatment Plant Improvements	\$5,000,000.00
Marble Falls Sewer Improvements	\$409,614.00
Searcy County SPG Water System Improvements	\$294,018.75

In cooperation with Governor Sanders, the Legislative PEER committee on June 19, 2024, approved \$5 million for emergency water and wastewater equipment purchases by the Arkansas Rural Water Association and \$55 million to the Arkansas Department of Agriculture for water, wastewater and stormwater projects. Four projects within the Buffalo River Watershed were awarded funding totaling \$1,453,302.50. A list of the 2024 ARPA projects is provided below:

Newton County Water System Improvements	
Nail Swain Fallsville Tank	\$215,325.00
Nail Swain Gallon Standpipe	\$241,950.00
Walker Mountain Road	\$132,247.50
Marshall Water System Storage Tank	\$863,500.00

Since January of 2023, the Arkansas Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Commission has awarded five projects funding from the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF) and Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (DWSRF) totaling \$8,438,960 and one project for \$65,920 from the Water, Sewer, and Solid Waste (WSSW) Fund. A list of the projects approved for funding is provided below:

City of Big Flat Water System Rehabilitation	
DWSRF-Loan	\$964,735.00
DWSRF-Principal Forgiveness	\$2,894,205.00
City of Marshall Water Storage Tank Replacement	
DWSRF-Loan	\$217,625.00
DWSRF-Principal Forgiveness	\$652,875.00
Morning Star Public Water Authority Water Storage Tank Refurbishment	
DWSRF-Loan	\$118,775.00

DWSRF-Principal Forgiveness	\$356,325.00
Parthenon Water Association Tank Repairs and Water Quality Mixer	
WSSW-Loan (declined funding)	\$65,920.00
H2Ozarks Septic Tank Remediation	
CWSRF-Principal Forgiveness	\$600,000.00
City of Marshall Downtown Water Main Rehab, Phase II	
DWSRF-Loan	\$642,125.00
DWSRF-Principal Forgiveness	\$1,926,375.00

Tourism and Tourism Impacts

The Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism (ADPHT) continues to reinforce The Natural State’s place as the premier destination for year-round outdoor recreation.

The department’s promotion and marketing efforts are centered on encouraging participation in outdoor recreation no matter the season or skill level. With marketing campaigns running in 20 states, Arkansas Tourism is reaching more outdoor enthusiasts than ever with messaging and visuals that highlight the state’s pristine rivers and lakes, scenic trails, world-class cycling and growing rock-climbing infrastructure.

The state is on a mission to reframe thought on travel seasons and implement strategies that grow visitation during the winter and early spring. Targeted campaigns are now placed in markets like Denver, Chicago and Salt Lake City to attract snow-covered outdoor enthusiasts to Arkansas’s trails during our comparatively milder winters.

The work of The Natural State Initiative, led by First Gentleman Bryan Sanders, continues to bring collaboration between the private and public sector, which includes representatives from ADPHT, Arkansas Game and Fish and the Arkansas Department of Commerce.

Water Quality

The Arkansas Department of Energy and Environment Division of Environmental Quality (DEQ) continues to collect water samples from the Buffalo River in its ambient water quality monitoring program. Samples are collected twice a quarter and analyzed for routine parameters.

APPENDIX A - TIMELINE OF EFFORTS

November 15, 2019	Following approval by the Arkansas Legislative Council, a total of \$2 million was available for Buffalo River Conservation Committee (BRCC) efforts - \$1 million from the Governor's discretionary fund, and \$1 million from private donors.
December 12, 2019	A 17-member subcommittee was established that is comprised of local landowners, local city and county government officials, and stakeholders in the areas of agriculture, conservation, and tourism.
January 23, 2020	The first meeting of the BRCC members and subcommittee members scheduled to take place in Marshall, Arkansas was cancelled due to inclement weather.
February 13, 2020	BRCC members and subcommittee members convened in Marshall, Arkansas for the first meeting. During this meeting the discussion centered around four main topic areas that will be the focus for future BRCC action and funding proposals. These four topic areas include: unpaved roads, cost-share programs for agriculture, water and wastewater system infrastructure, and tourism and tourism impacts.
March 11, 2020	The first coronavirus case in Arkansas prompted the cancellation of scheduled subcommittee meetings on March 19, 2020, and April 2, 2020.
April 29, 2020	BRCC members and subcommittee members convened by conference call to get an update on the work of the four subcommittees and discuss efforts to move forward.
June 2, 2020	<p>BRCC members and subcommittee members convened to review proposals submitted for funding as well as receive updates from the four topic areas. Requests for funding included four unpaved roads sites as well as three water and wastewater proposals.</p> <p>During the meeting the four unpaved roads sites and funding of \$250,000 to the City of Jasper for wastewater treatment facility improvements received recommendations for funding.</p>
June 9, 2020	Presentation to the House and Senate Public Health, Welfare, and Labor Committee. The presentation included an update on BRCC efforts and the current status of funding requests. Secretary Ward stated that the BRCC members and subcommittee members would continue to refine the funding proposals that were received and work with partners to maximize the use of state funding on projects within the Buffalo River Watershed.
July 2, 2020	The BRCC Tourism Work Group met to discuss tourism in the Buffalo River Watershed and to consider potential collaborative/engagement opportunities. Participants identified a strong interest in better understanding the feasibility of a process for developing a day-use permit system. The Tourism Work Group

committed to work with the National Park Services as a partner in the park's efforts to conduct appropriate studies to better understand this issue and recommend policies.

August 6, 2020

BRCC members and subcommittee members convened to review updated proposals submitted for funding and receive updates from the four topic areas.

BRCC members and subcommittee members decided to table discussions regarding funding for Marble Falls and feral hogs until additional information was provided. The BRCC approved the following updated requests for funding:

- (1) Maintaining the funding amount of \$250,000 to the City of Jasper for wastewater treatment facility improvements.
- (2) Revising funding requests for unpaved roads to reflect \$231,935 for Cane Branch Road in Searcy County and \$397,400 for Cave Mountain Road (to Hawksbill Crag) in Newton County. The total funding for unpaved roads equates to a \$570,979 once contingency costs are added and funding from the federal nonpoint source management program are subtracted.

August 20, 2020

Presentation to the House and Senate Public Health, Welfare, and Labor Committee. The presentation included an update on BRCC efforts and the status of funding requests. The legislative committee approved the funding request of \$250,000 to the City of Jasper and \$570,979 to assist with the Cane Branch Road and Cave Mountain Road unpaved road sites. With the approval of the two projects, funding of \$179,021 remains for distribution by the BRCC.

November 4, 2020

BRCC members and subcommittee members convened to receive updates from the four topic areas and review a funding proposal. The BRCC approved providing funding to the Town of Gilbert for its Dark-Sky Streetlight Conversion Proposal in the amount of \$11,600.

November 9, 2020

Consideration of the Town of Gilbert funding proposal was reviewed and approved by the House and Senate Public Health, Welfare, and Labor Committee. With the approval of this project, funding of \$167,421 remains for distribution by the BRCC.

November 9, 2020

Joint press release from the BRCC members announcing the application period for projects that need assistance through the remaining \$167,421 in funding available through the BRCC. Applications were accepted through December 15, 2020.

December 15, 2020

Applications seeking assistance were received for five eligible projects. Funding proposals included requests for assistance with feral hog eradication, tree planting in Searcy County, the purchase and renovation of a historic building in Jasper for public use, and two Buffalo River algae bloom studies. Applications will be reviewed and discussed by the BRCC and subcommittee members at the next quarterly meeting.

January 7, 2021 BRCC members and subcommittee members convened to receive updates on topic areas, receive presentations, and consider the eligible proposals received by the December 15, 2020, application deadline.

January 21, 2021 BRCC members and subcommittee members reconvened to continue funding discussions. The BRCC members agreed to provide \$65,000 in funding to the U.S. Geological Survey to continue a water quality study and \$2,500 to fund the Searcy County Chamber of Commerce tree proposal.

January 29, 2021 BRCC members and subcommittee members reconvened to consider the feral hog eradication proposal submitted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service Wildlife Services. The BRCC members agreed to provide \$50,000 for the feral hog eradication project and conduct additional research on the proposed mobile app project.

February 4, 2021 Secretary Ward provided a report on the BRCC's activities and presented funding recommendations to the Arkansas House and Senate Joint Budget Committee. The funding recommendations were approved.

February 9, 2021 The \$50,000 approved by the BRCC for feral hog eradication efforts in the Buffalo River Watershed was disbursed to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

February 19, 2021 The \$65,000 approved by the BRCC for the continuation of the U.S. Geological Survey's (USGS) water quality study on the Buffalo River was provided to the USGS.

April 9, 2021 The \$2,500 was disbursed for the Greater Searcy County Chamber of Commerce tree planting project.

June 9, 2021 The \$250,000 was disbursed to the City of Jasper for improvements to the water treatment facility.

June 29, 2021 The BRCC met to receive updates from the four topic areas and discuss Act 536 that codified the BRCC in Arkansas Code. Senator Missy Irvin provided remarks about her sponsorship of Act 536 to help ensure the work of the BRCC continues.

September 29, 2021 BRCC members and subcommittee members met in Jasper for project updates and a presentation from representatives of Johnny Morris and Bass Pro Shops regarding plans to redevelop the former Dogpatch theme park property in Newton County.

November 30, 2021 BRCC members and subcommittee members met in Marshall for project updates. The BRCC members agreed to consider funding proposals for the remaining balance of \$49,921 at the first quarterly meeting in 2022.

March 23, 2022 BRCC members and subcommittee members met via Zoom to receive project updates and hear presentations on funding proposals.

- April 29, 2022** BRCC members and subcommittee members met via Zoom. BRCC members voted to allocate \$24,960.50, half of the remaining balance of \$49,921, to the feral hog eradication project and the U.S. Geological Survey filamentous algae study.
- May 13, 2022** BRCC members and subcommittee members met in Jasper for a tour of the Cave Mountain Road project and discussion of the Jasper water project, followed by a tour and discussion in St. Joe about feral hog eradication efforts.
- August 19, 2022** BRCC members and subcommittee members met in Jasper to receive project updates and a presentation on the status of the Marble Falls Nature Park project that is being developed at the former Dogpatch site.
- November 18, 2022** BRCC members and subcommittee members met in Marshall to receive project updates, a presentation by the City of Marshall on needed upgrades to its water and wastewater systems, a presentation by the U.S. Forest Service on the Robert's Gap Project and water quality sampling, an update by H2Ozarks on the septic tank replacement program, and a report from the Marshall FFA on recent activities. BRCC members voted to work with Governor-elect Sanders and the Arkansas General Assembly to pursue additional funding for the BRCC to continue working on projects within the Buffalo River Watershed.
- March 31, 2023** BRCC members and subcommittee members met via Zoom to receive project updates and a presentation by Connie Walden, Project Manager for the Marble Falls Sewer Improvement District project.
- July 17, 2023** BRCC members and subcommittee members met in Ponca to receive project updates and discuss distribution of the remaining BRCC funding. BRCC members voted to consider proposals for the remaining funds at the next meeting.
- September 21, 2023** BRCC members and subcommittee members met in Jasper to receive project updates and review proposals for the remaining BRCC funds. After discussion, BRCC members requested additional information about the proposals and voted to review them again in October.
- October 31, 2023** BRCC members and subcommittee members met to review proposals for the remaining BRCC funds. The members voted to award the balance of \$69,676 for the proposal submitted by H2Ozarks to improve water quality in the Mill Creek Watershed within the Buffalo National River Watershed.
- December 20, 2024** BRCC members and subcommittee members met via Zoom to receive updates on the following focus area working groups: Cost-Share Programs for Agriculture, Unpaved Roads, Water and Wastewater System Infrastructure, Tourism and Tourism Impacts. Members reviewed the 2024 BRCC Annual Report.

APPENDIX B - FEDERAL PARTNER UPDATES

2024 Update on National Forest Service Activities within the Buffalo River Watershed

The Ozark-St. Francis National Forests had dynamic year in 2024 that kicked off with record-setting visitation for the Great North American Eclipse event, and an extended warm and dry fall with increased fire risk. Strong collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service remained a top priority for monitoring for rare and endangered bat species, resulting in added protective measures to protect critical habitat at Wolf Creek Cave. Water quality monitoring throughout the year at seven sites in the Buffalo, King's, and White River watersheds provided data on temperature, pH, turbidity and conductivity, even with very low water levels through November.

Recreational opportunities abound around and within the Richland Creek, Leatherwood, and Upper Buffalo Wilderness Areas. Developed areas at Upper Buffalo Trails, Alum Cove Natural Bridge, Sams Throne, and Richland Creek Campground saw an increase in use in 2024, as did more primitive areas like the Ozark Highlands Trail and Whitaker Point (Hawksbill Crag) Trail.

The U.S. Forest Service is proud to offer an accessible hunting opportunity in cooperation with the Arkansas Game & Fish Commission in the Bearcat Hollow Wildlife Management Area in 2024 and 2025.

Watershed management activities completed this year include 33 miles of improvement to road surfaces through blading, spot gravel, shaping water control structures, and trimming back vegetation; prescribed burning totaling 808 acres to reduce fuel loading and increase plant diversity on the forest floor; and commercial timber thinning on 445 acres, with an additional 458 acres treated for removal of invasive plant species.

Forest management activities planned in 2025 include: Whitaker Point parking improvement; expansion of the Upper Buffalo Mountain Bike Trails system; commercial thinning of pine and hardwood areas; prescribed burning; and continued road improvement in conjunction with Stone, Searcy, Newton and Madison counties, including priority water quality monitoring.

The U.S. Forest Service continues to engage with interested groups, counties, agencies, and individuals about management activities and access within the watershed.

The 857,632-acre Buffalo River Watershed includes 177,220 acres of Forest Service lands (21% of watershed) intermixed with private and state ownership (68% of watershed), and the Buffalo National River (11% of the watershed) in Newton and Searcy counties. Congressionally designated Leatherwood, Richland Creek, and Upper Buffalo Wilderness Areas make up 40,479 acres (23%) of Forest Service lands within the watershed.

2024 Update on Buffalo National River Activities

Buffalo National River staff and research partners continued to work on the many efforts previously reported on in the 2020-2023 annual reports. What follows is a brief overview of the work going on at Buffalo National River. It is a pleasure for the National Park Service (NPS) at Buffalo National River to

work alongside the BRCC and its many dedicated committee members and communities toward collaborative protection of the watershed.

Water Quality and Septic Systems

Buffalo National River staff have been collecting water quality samples since the 1980's. Each year park scientists collect hundreds of water quality samples throughout the park, including tributaries, springs, and mainstem sites, to help analyze potential impacts to water quality, aquatic organisms, and human health. These data are shared with Arkansas Department of Energy and Environment for inclusion in the assessment process for the 305(b) report.

Some examples of projects the park worked on in 2024 include:

- Final data analysis and publication writing for the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) filamentous algae project. This will complete a five-year effort to help determine the cause of recent filamentous algal blooms in the river. This has been a collaborative effort with USGS-Little Rock; Arkansas Department of Energy and Environment; Arkansas Game and Fish Commission; Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism; University of Central Arkansas; and National Park Service.
- Completed year one of a freshwater mussel habitat suitability project in collaboration with USGS, University of Missouri at Columbia, Arkansas State University, and Ozark National Scenic Riverways.
- Completed emergency repair of water line to Steel Creek campground.
- Contractors began repair and remodel of the Tyler Bend launch. Contractors started work this summer during low flow to remove the sea wall and will return this winter to complete work on removing structures, creating a loop to improve traffic flow, and improve the launch/access area.
- Scientist in Park interns completed a visitor use study during the peak season of 2023, with their internships ending early 2024. Results showed less use than a previous similar survey (2013-2014); however, lower river flows occurred during 2023 which could explain reduced visitation. The final report is being drafted.

Publications from previous studies:

- Flow cytometric assessments of metabolic activity in bacterial assemblages provide insight into ecosystem condition along the Buffalo National River, Arkansas 2024 J.A. Jenkins et al.
- Master Thesis – Evaluating the potential effect of nitrogen and toxicological responses of juvenile *Lampsilis reeveiana* (Mollusca: Unionidae) in the Buffalo National River. 2022 A.M. Pieri

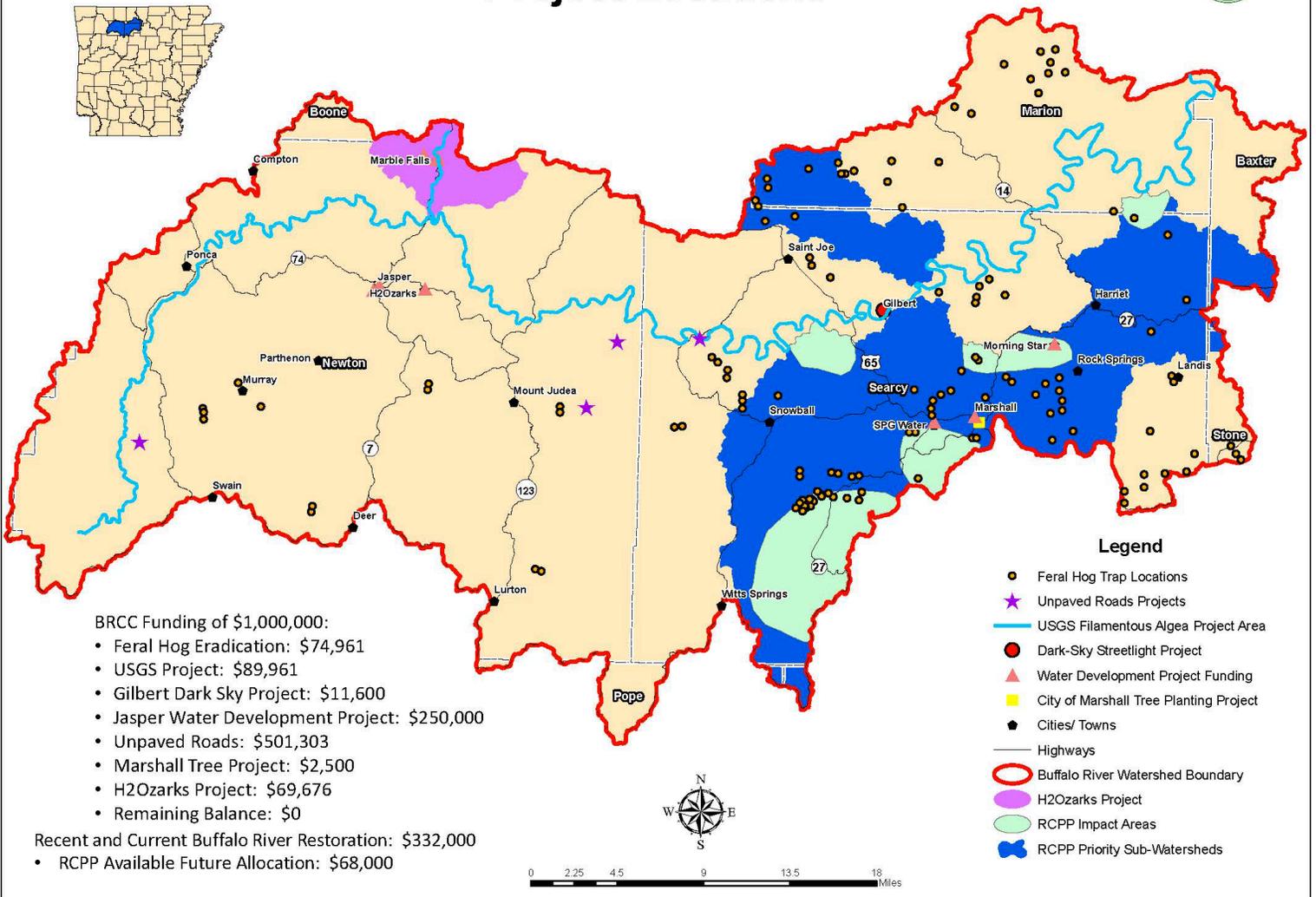
Agriculture

Over 1,500 acres in the park, across three counties (Marion, Newton, and Searcy) at Buffalo National River, are in agricultural use. These agricultural fields are used by local farmers who

conduct haying and grazing activities under Special Use Permits (SUP) issued by the National Park Service. The park continues to monitor the current 29 hay permits and six grazing permits that are in place. Permit conditions require permittees to implement specific best management practices (BMPs) for agricultural fields. These BMPs include appropriate setbacks from riparian zones and nutrient management (fertilizer/lime applications) based on recommendations from the University of Arkansas and county extension agents. Park staff installed permit boundary markers on hay fields nearest the river. Efforts to establish vegetative buffers between agricultural fields and the adjacent waterways was completed in 2023 and staff are monitoring vegetation development in the buffer zones.

APPENDIX C- Project Map

Buffalo River Watershed Project Locations



BRCC Funding of \$1,000,000:

- Feral Hog Eradication: \$74,961
- USGS Project: \$89,961
- Gilbert Dark Sky Project: \$11,600
- Jasper Water Development Project: \$250,000
- Unpaved Roads: \$501,303
- Marshall Tree Project: \$2,500
- H2Ozarks Project: \$69,676
- Remaining Balance: \$0

Recent and Current Buffalo River Restoration: \$332,000

- RCPP Available Future Allocation: \$68,000

Legend

- Feral Hog Trap Locations
- ★ Unpaved Roads Projects
- USGS Filamentous Algae Project Area
- Dark-Sky Streetlight Project
- ▲ Water Development Project Funding
- City of Marshall Tree Planting Project
- Cities/ Towns
- Highways
- Buffalo River Watershed Boundary
- H2Ozarks Project
- RCPP Impact Areas
- RCPP Priority Sub-Watersheds



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**BUFFALO RIVER CONSERVATION COMMITTEE
2024 ANNUAL REPORT**