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New River Gorge National Park and Preserve Designation Reflects Decades of NRGRDA, Local Support and Perseverance

Beckley, W.Va. (Dec. 21) – Decades of unwavering advocacy led to the recent redesignation of the New River Gorge National River to the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve, the 63rd national park to be managed by the National Park Service.

The New River Gorge National Park and Preserve Designation Act was added by the West Virginia Congressional delegation to Fiscal Year 2021 Omnibus Appropriations Bill and pandemic relief measure expected to be passed today by the U.S. Congress.

“The road to the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve has been plowed and paved by over 60 years of vision and hard work,” said Dave Arnold. “There are many people -- a number of them who never lived long enough to see this day -- who were a big part of this legislative victory. There are just too many people to thank; however, our county commissioners, especially those on the New River Gorge Regional Development Authority (NRGRDA) and our representatives in Washington, D.C. both past and present, worked together in a bipartisan endeavor to do something very special for the people of West Virginia.”

Arnold, a board member of the NRGRDA and founding partner of Adventures on the Gorge, added, “We have now gone from the minor leagues to the majors. We have joined the best of the best of America’s public lands.”

Arnold reflects that state elected officials had the vision for the national park and preserve nearly six decades ago. He cited the Jan. 29, 1963, House Concurrent Resolution No. 9, entitled “Encouraging the speedy development of the New River Gorge Area into a national playground by the federal and state governments and the citizens of West Virginia,” which was under consideration by the House Committee on Forestry and Conservation of the W.Va. House of Delegates.

Initial success came to the New River Gorge region in 1978 when the federal government designated the New River as a “national river.” Arnold said the grassroots leadership of the New River Gorge Regional Development Authority and its four counties – Fayette, Nicholas, Raleigh, and Summers counties, plus that of nearby Mercer County – was instrumental in building local, state and federal support for the national park and preserve designation.

Jina Belcher, NRGRDA executive director, said “Our two U.S. Senators, Joe Manchin and Shelley Moore Capito; U.S. Rep. Carol Miller; and Gov. Jim Justice never wavered from our ultimate goal, and now it is up to this region to take bold steps to capitalize on this immense opportunity.” Arnold specifically praised former U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall II, who chaired the House Natural Resources Committee, for his early support and encouragement.

While there are 19 national preserves in the NPS system, there are only six combination national parks and preserves, all in Alaska. There is one national monument and preserve — Oregon Caves National Monument and Preserve, in Southern Oregon.

The New River Gorge National Park and Preserve Designation Act would designate between 5,000 and 6,000 acres of the 72,808-acre tract of federal land as a national park component.

Arnold emphasized the importance of hunting being permitted in new public areas of the “preserve” property, offering another important benefit to West Virginians and others interested in visiting the New River Gorge region, as well as businesses catering to consumers seeking additional hunting venues.

The national park component also would include a portion of the lower Gorge, extending northward from Keeneys Creek, past the New River Gorge Bridge and Canyon Rim Visitor Center to the park’s northern boundary, adjacent to Hawks Nest State Park.

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