



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **NRGRDA Celebrates ARC Support**

### **For Gateway Communities of the New River Gorge Region**

**Beckley, W.Va. (Sept. 29, 2022)** – The New River Gorge region has been selected as a collective team to participate in the 2022 Appalachia Gateway Communities Initiative sponsored through a partnership between the Appalachian Regional Commission and The Conservation Fund.

Chance Raso, Special Projects Coordinator at the New River Gorge Regional Development Authority (NRGRDA), has been at the helm of a regional team pursuing this opportunity. As a result of its selection, the New River Gorge team will attend the upcoming Appalachian Gateway Communities Initiative workshop, which will be held from October 25-27 in Lake Junaluska, N.C. Raso said after the workshop a comprehensive action plan will be developed that will support future opportunities to pursue grant funding for action plan implementation.

Raso said the region's specific project focus is targeted toward having all the gateway communities of New River Gorge National Park and Preserve work collaboratively for standardized wayfinding, branding, and signage. Raso said the goal is to provide opportunities for visitors to see that all the communities they travel through when visiting the national park have various recreational assets, cultural resources, and tourism amenities. The regional collaboration and branding would also help these communities leverage economic development and small business creation.

The regional team that Raso leads include:

- Andy Steel, National Park Service
- Corey Lilly, Director, Outdoor Economic Development Office, City of Beckley

- Christine Kinder, Raleigh County Extension Agent for Community Development, West Virginia State University Extension
- Christy Bailey, Executive Director, National Coal Heritage Area Authority
- Stacy Thomas, Community Coaching Programs Coordinator, West Virginia Community Development Hub
- Rebecca Peterson, Executive Director, Explore Summers County
- Mayor Anne Cavalier of Smithers

Raso said team members represent the New River Gorge region of southern West Virginia, which includes the four counties of Nicholas, Fayette, Raleigh, and Summers. He said multiple gateway communities exist within the counties, including Summersville, Richwood, Fayetteville, Oak Hill, Mount Hope, Ansted, Smithers, Montgomery, Gauley Bridge, Meadow Bridge, Thurmond, Beckley, and Hinton.

“While the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve is the major geographic feature and public land that defines the region, many other public lands managed by various agencies also exist within our team’s four counties,” said Raso. He said they include the Gauley River National Recreation Area and Bluestone National Scenic River also managed by the National Park Service; Summersville Lake and Bluestone Lake managed by the Army Corps of Engineers; Monongahela National Forest managed by the U.S. Forest Service; and Carnifex Ferry Battlefield State Park, Hawks Nest State Park, Babcock State Park, Little Beaver State Park, Bluestone State Park, Pipestem State Park, Plum Orchard Lake Wildlife Management Area, Bluestone Wildlife Management Area, and Beury Mountain Wildlife Management Area managed by the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources.

Jina Belcher, NRGRDA’s executive director, said, “each of the four counties have excellent natural, cultural, and scenic resources and histories of outdoor recreation tourism being part of the regional economy.” She added that whitewater rafting has been popular since the 1960’s, and visitor increases to the New River Gorge region since redesignation of the park and preserve in late 2020 surpassed the previous record of 1.2 million set in 1996 by 500,000 people. “The upside we see as economic developers and planners are that many of these visitors are also coming to see other public lands and gateway communities right outside of the national park.”

To help communities develop thoughtful strategies around some of Appalachia’s most treasured assets, The Conservation Fund launched the Appalachian Gateway Communities Initiative in 2007 with support from ARC and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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**About New River Gorge Regional Development Authority:** The New River Gorge Regional Development Authority's (NRGRDA) mission is to initiate, facilitate and support the economic and community development efforts within the counties of Fayette, Nicholas, Raleigh, and Summers located in this region of southern West Virginia. NRGRDA stimulates the regional economy through business expansion and retention efforts, including an extensive portfolio of financial services; the management of sites for new companies locating to our region; and serving as a point of access for local service providers which offer a variety of technical assistance for business owners.

The West Virginia Hive is the entrepreneurship program of the NRGRDA and the administrator of the Country Roads Angel Network (CRAN). More can be found at <https://nrgrda.org/>