

# Corps' lakes grow sadder, but visit brings hope of fix

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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

**LAKE OUACHITA** — For the past 24 years, Rick Stokes has watched his campgrounds become ridiculously outdated.

Built in the early 1960s, when the ultimate in camping equipment was a 20-foot camper, the 19 U.S. Army Corps of Engineer campgrounds here are easily overwhelmed by the 42-foot megacampers rolling in nowadays.

The big rigs get stuck trying to back out of the tiny pads available on Lake Ouachita. They pull 20 more amps than what's avail-

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**Rick Stokes**, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers resource manager at Lake Ouachita, wants to shore up the heavily used Joplin campground, stabilizing its growing erosion problem and making it more modern. Stokes took a group of federal and state dignitaries interested in improving conditions at campsites along federal lakes on a tour of the peninsula Monday.



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**Sen. Blanche Lincoln**, D-Ark., (center) talks with Joseph Westphal (left), assistant secretary of the Army for civil works, and Col. Robert Crear, who directs the Vicksburg District for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The three toured a campground on Lake Ouachita on Monday while promoting new legislation meant to improve recreation on federal lakes.

# Corps

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able from the 30-amp outlets.

"A lot of times the campers go home frustrated," the Corps' Stokes says.

And that's not the worst of it. For years now, Stokes says, the money budgeted toward the recreation side of the lake has been limited to bare-bones operation and upkeep. Stokes estimates he has a backlog of maintenance projects that would cost \$14 million.

The concerns of the Corps' resource manager at Ouachita — which alone accounts for 28 percent of visits to Arkansas Corps sites — are also the concerns of park managers all over the country at nearly 1,800 federal lakes and reservoirs.

Meanwhile, around those lakes, entrepreneurs from bait shops to resorts are calling for more say-so in how the reservoirs are managed.

Maybe help is on the way.

Flying in from Washington, D.C., on Monday, Sen. Blanche Lincoln, D-Ark., and Joseph Westphal, assistant secretary of the Army for its civil works division, toured the Joplin campground at the lake and visited with Stokes to view the problems firsthand.

The senator is backing proposed legislation that would focus congressional attention and support on recreational facilities at federal lakes. Westphal is a member of a commission studying the problem.

The two, joined by Corps personnel and public and private tourism promoters in Arkansas, also toured the Dam Site campground on Greers Ferry Lake.

A particular concern for Stokes is the shoreline erosion at the campgrounds. Especially on the narrow peninsula of the Joplin campground, the banks are getting steeper and rockier.

The sand for the public beach washed away long ago.

Stokes points to a picnic table for a campsite. The site is level to the edge of the picnic table's crumbling cement pad and then falls away down a steep hill several yards from the shore.

"The area has gotten so degraded," Stokes says. "We have to do something."

The National Recreation Lakes Study Commission, created by Congress and appointed by President Clinton in 1996, seeks to streamline the way 11 federal agencies think about and operate 1,782 man-made lakes.

Since the agencies, led primarily by the Corps, started damming rivers for flood control, job creation, navigation, irrigation and electric power generation in the New Deal days, the resulting lakes have become meccas for vacationers, water sport enthusiasts and sportsmen.

The commission found that the lakes get about 900 million visits a year and add \$44 billion to the national economy. It estimates the lakes will see almost 2 billion annual visits by the middle of the new century.

But the various agencies each focus on different missions and often act as if the recreation business the lakes support isn't their concern, the commission found. Meanwhile, the many private businesses like marinas and resorts that depend on the lake as a recreation resource are often left out of the discussion.

And yet, upon researching the matter, the commissioners say they've found that recreation is a congressionally authorized purpose at most of the lakes, though even here the legislation isn't consistent.

"The legislation that dictates how recreation on the lakes is addressed is 70 years old," Lincoln said.

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The proposal could have a big impact on the Natural State, says Richard Davies, director of the state Department of Parks and Tourism.

Seventy percent of the campsites in Arkansas are Corps sites, Davies says. The lakes add \$3.6 billion each year to the state's tourism industry, he says.

Like Westphal, Davies served on the National Recreation Lakes Study Commission and supports the idea of creating a Recreation Lakes Council.

He says working on the commission has been a real eye opener.

On any lake at any time, one group might need the lake to be lowered to generate power, while another group needs the lake raised to protect fishing and water sports, Davies says. Still another group downstream needs water released to protect fish in the river. All the while flood control is a concern. Somewhere in there campers fit into the mix.

"We [recreation interests] aren't trying to be the only dog on the porch," Davies said. "We're just trying to be up there with the rest of them."

The Recreation Lakes Act also would try to cast the numerous federal lakes as a system of recreational facilities instead of as a scattered collection of local parks, much as the National Trails and National Scenic Byways programs have done.

The act would immediately establish 20 existing lakes as pilot lakes that would work as laboratories for programs that could be duplicated throughout the new system. The pilot lakes would receive \$1 million to try new public and private partnerships that would encourage and promote recreation as a more visible component of the lake's other missions.

Davies and Lincoln say they are pushing to win one of the pilot lake designations in Arkansas.

On its own, the Corps also is asking Congress this year to shore up recreation facilities at its lakes. The agency wants to add \$27 million to its budget to refurbish about 20 sites within its 38 districts.

Stokes' Joplin campsite and the Dam Site at Greers Ferry are both slated to be among the 20 the proposed funding would benefit. If Congress approves the appropriation, the Joplin site would receive \$2.9 million. The Greers Ferry site would receive \$3.8 million.

All of the sudden attention pleases Stokes.

"We can always prop it up," he says. "What you see is being propped up. We're trying to keep things put together, fiddling around the sites and everything."

"We're hoping that if all this comes together, we'll be able to address those problems and satisfy the customer."

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