

# ARKANSAS'S SALINE RIVER

## CONSERVATION AND RECREATION PLAN



The Nature Conservancy



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## Executive Summary

The Saline River Conservation and Recreation Plan is a collaborative initiative spearheaded by the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, Arkansas Office of Outdoor Recreation, and The Nature Conservancy. In response to increasing interest in preserving the ecological integrity and enhancing the recreational potential of the Saline River, this plan outlines a comprehensive strategy to address the ecological challenges and maximize recreational opportunities along the river.

The Saline River, known for its rich biodiversity and relatively undeveloped state, offers significant ecological and recreational value. This plan aims to protect the river's unique habitats and rare species, while also promoting sustainable recreational activities like fishing, paddling, snorkeling and hiking.

### Key components of the plan include:

1. Collaborative and Adaptive Management: Establishing the Saline River Conservation and Recreation Partnership through a Memorandum of Understanding among the lead organizations and inviting additional partners to join. The partnership will meet at least quarterly to review progress, secure funding and develop initiatives.
2. Conservation Strategies: Implementing measures to protect key lands, stabilize streambanks, enforce environmental regulations, support community planning and develop sediment retention along unpaved roads. The focus will be on protecting the upper reaches of the watershed, with a particular focus on the Alum Fork, to enhance habitat connectivity and leverage funding opportunities.
3. Recreation Enhancement: Improving access points and recreational facilities between Moore Ford and Saline Crossing, developing the Alum Fork Conservation/Recreation Area, removing river hazards, increasing law enforcement presence and exploring the feasibility of creating a whitewater park.

This plan, designed for a five-year period, emphasizes a collaborative and adaptive approach to ensure the Saline River remains a cherished resource for future generations, balancing conservation needs with recreational development.

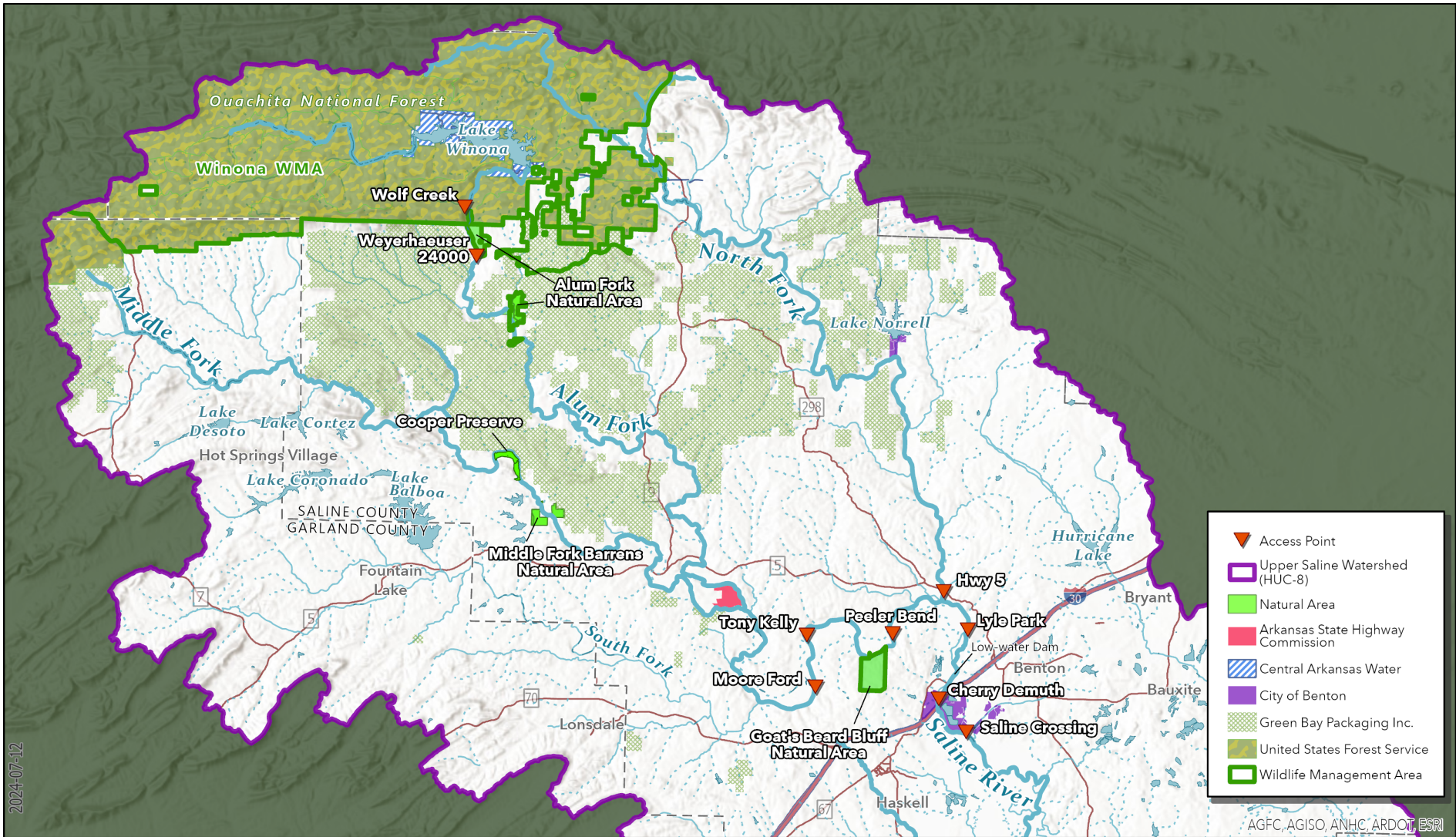
## Overview

In 2024, the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, Arkansas Office of Outdoor Recreation, and The Nature Conservancy initiated a planning process for the Saline River in central Arkansas. This initiative was in response to growing interest and enthusiasm about the potential to preserve the ecological integrity and enhance the recreational opportunities of the river. Together, these organizations aimed to develop a comprehensive plan that addressed the ecological challenges facing the Saline River while maximizing its recreational potential.

The process was led by a planning committee consisting of these four organizations and Saline County, and with the help of Risora Consulting, a conservation-focused consulting group based in Jackson, Tennessee. The working group engaged a diverse range of stakeholders, including government agencies, conservation groups, recreational organizations and local communities, to create a sustainable and inclusive framework for the river's future. This plan, designed to guide activities over a five-year period, outlines strategies to protect the river's biodiversity while also enhancing its recreational opportunities. Further, the plan outlines a long-term collaborative and adaptive approach to managing the river to ensure that the Saline River remains a cherished and accessible resource for generations to come.

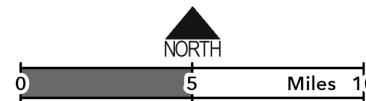
### Planning Committee:

- ▶ Bill Holimon, (retired) Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission
- ▶ Dustin Lynch, Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission
- ▶ Katherine Andrews, Office of Outdoor Recreation
- ▶ Eric Brinkman, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission
- ▶ Darrell Bowman, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission
- ▶ Kirsten Bartlow, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission
- ▶ Becky Flynn, Office of Outdoor Recreation
- ▶ Roger Mangham, Arkansas TNC
- ▶ Anna Metrailler, Arkansas TNC
- ▶ Caleb Pierce, Arkansas TNC
- ▶ Matt Brumley, Saline County
- ▶ Ben West, Risora Consulting
- ▶ Michele Sides, Risora Consulting



## Saline River Conservation and Recreation Plan

The Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, Arkansas Office of Outdoor Recreation, The Nature Conservancy of Arkansas, and Saline County are working together to implement the *Saline River Conservation and Recreation Plan*. This plan focuses on the Saline River upstream from Saline Crossing in Benton. This map was created by the GIS Division of the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.



**Notice of Intent:**  
 This map was produced by AGFC GIS staff to visualize general location(s) of subject property. Unless otherwise stated, features depicted herein do not represent legal or survey boundaries and are intended for reference purposes only.



## ***Collaborative and Adaptive Management***

We intend the recommendations in this conservation and recreation plan to guide activities on and around the Saline River for the next five years. Sound recommendations further into the future are difficult to generate given the complex and unknown nature of future developments. Given this uncertainty, managing the Saline to enhance recreation while also protecting its ecological integrity will require ongoing collaboration among myriad organizations in an iterative and adaptive fashion. To manage complexity, adapt to future conditions and drive implementation of projects, we recommend the development of a Saline River Conservation and Recreation Partnership.

The partnership would be created via MOU among five lead organizations: Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, Arkansas Office of Outdoor Recreation, The Nature Conservancy and Saline County. In addition to these, other organizations will be invited to join the partnership, as determined by partnership members. The lead organizations will identify a person or group to coordinate the activities of the partnership and facilitate ongoing collaboration. The partnership would meet quarterly to review progress, collaborate on funding opportunities and develop ongoing initiatives and strategies. A draft MOU is attached as an appendix.



### **Others invited to join the partnership should include, but not be limited to, the following organizations:**

- ▶ Arkansas Department of Agriculture
- ▶ Arkansas Parks and Recreation Foundation
- ▶ Central Arkansas Water
- ▶ Green Bay Packaging
- ▶ Saline River Canoe
- ▶ U.S. Forest Service
- ▶ USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
- ▶ Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality
- ▶ Arkansas State Parks
- ▶ City of Benton
- ▶ Metroplan
- ▶ Saline River Watershed Alliance
- ▶ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The partnership will work to build upon and enhance the existing models of co-managed state lands in Arkansas, including the Hobbs State Park Conservation Area, Cossatot River State Park and Natural Area, and Logoly State Park and Natural Area, each which feature collaborative, multi-agency approaches to management of state lands. In addition, models exist that also involve non-state agencies in co-management arrangements. The Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission and The Nature Conservancy oversee 14 combinations of state natural areas and nature preserves, including Rattlesnake Ridge, which is a pioneer in combining recreation with conservation. Moro Big Pine exemplifies a successful public-private partnership in land management where lands are co-managed between state agencies and a private timber company.

## ***Vision and Objectives***

The Saline River in central Arkansas stands out for its rich biodiversity, rare aquatic species, and intact hydrology. Crossing two ecoregions, it remains less developed compared to other rivers in the area, highlighting its ecological importance amidst high development pressures. At the same time, its location in central Arkansas makes it a valuable recreational asset with excellent opportunities for outdoor recreation. We propose a strategic and collaborative approach to conserve its ecological integrity while maximizing its recreational value. Through this approach, we hope to create a model for river management in Arkansas.

We endeavor to conserve ecologically significant portions of the Saline's upper watershed, including the Alum, Middle and North forks, to maintain the River's hydrology and reduce sediment and other pollution. Through this work, we hope to ensure the viability of sensitive species in the river over the next century. Concurrently, we want to maximize the recreational value of the river, both to stimulate local economies and to improve the lives of Arkansans.

We will establish a collaborative approach to managing the Saline River into the future. Under the leadership of the ANHC, AGFC, Arkansas Office of Outdoor Recreation and TNC, we will engage other key stakeholders in a long-term partnership to identify needs and opportunities and drive collaborative initiatives for this mission.



## ***Stakeholder Engagement***

Stakeholder input is critical to developing a comprehensive and effective plan for a public resource like the Saline River. We deployed a multifaceted approach to engage stakeholders, involving both interviews and focus groups, to ensure broad and in-depth input. The specific stakeholders who have participated in our interviews and focus groups reflect the interest in the Saline River's use and management. These stakeholders included:

- ▶ Arkansas Canoe Club: Promotes paddling sports and river conservation.
- ▶ Arkansas Department of Agriculture: Focuses on agricultural development and sustainability.
- ▶ Arkansas Department of Transportation: Manages transportation infrastructure and policy.
- ▶ Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality: Regulates and enforces environmental laws to protect air, water and land resources in Arkansas.
- ▶ Arkansas Master Naturalists: Volunteers dedicated to the stewardship of natural resources.
- ▶ Arkansas Parks and Recreation Foundation: Supports the enhancement and preservation of parks in Arkansas.
- ▶ Central Arkansas Water: The primary water utility serving the central Arkansas area.
- ▶ City of Benton: The municipal government of Benton, Arkansas, involved in local development and planning.
- ▶ Green Bay Packaging: A manufacturing and timber company with significant land holdings in the region.
- ▶ Metroplan: A regional planning organization for the Little Rock metropolitan area.
- ▶ Saline County: The local government responsible for county-level administration and services.
- ▶ Saline Crossing: Focuses on the historical preservation and recreational development of Saline Crossing.
- ▶ Saline River Canoe: A local outfitter providing canoe rentals and promoting recreation on the Saline.
- ▶ Saline River Watershed Alliance: Advocates for the conservation of the Saline River watershed.
- ▶ U.S. Forest Service: Manages national forests and grasslands.
- ▶ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: Dedicated to the conservation of fish, wildlife and natural habitats.
- ▶ USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service: Provides assistance to farmers and landowners to promote conservation practices.

These stakeholders provided input about various aspects of the Saline River, with a strong focus on conservation and recreation. The planning committee used their input to develop both the vision and mission for this effort, as well as identify several strategic initiatives to pursue over the next five years. Further, the planning committee developed a management framework to involve many of these groups in the ongoing adaptive management of the river.

## Conservation Strategies

The Saline River is renowned for its rich biological diversity and ecological significance. Flowing through the Ouachita Mountains and the Gulf Coastal Plain, it supports a wide range of habitats that are home to numerous rare and sensitive species, including seven federally listed threatened and endangered species. Additionally, the Saline River hosts over 75 fish species, including the endemic Ouachita madtom, southern brook lamprey, and peppered shiner. The river's healthy ecosystems also support diverse populations of freshwater mussels, crayfish and other aquatic organisms.

Past efforts to protect the Saline River include designations as Extraordinary Resource Waterbodies for its forks, which ensures extra legal protections against detrimental actions like damming and gravel mining. These measures are crucial for preserving the river's scenic beauty, recreational potential and scientific values. However, threats still remain from sediment, which currently stands as the greatest threat to the ecological integrity of the Saline. Strategies we identified to mitigate sediment include:

- ▶ Protection of key lands via purchase and easements
- ▶ Pursuit of programs and funding for streambank stabilization
- ▶ Enforcement of existing state/federal environmental laws, particularly around development
- ▶ Use of incentives, ordinances and consulting to support comprehensive community planning
- ▶ Development of better sediment retention along unpaved roadways

## LAND PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT

### EXPANSION OF EXISTING NATURAL AREAS

We recommend concentrating work over the next five years on protecting lands around existing natural areas, including the Alum Fork Natural Area, Goat's Beard Bluff Natural Area and Middle Fork Barrens Natural Area. We will do this by collaboratively exploring multiple funding opportunities for protection via fee title and easement, including programs like the Land and Water Conservation Fund, Forest Legacy Program, Wetlands Reserve Program, and USDA Regional Conservation Partnership Program, among others.

We will particularly focus on protecting lands around the existing Alum Fork Natural Area. Reasons for this strategy include:

- ▶ Stakeholders view the Alum Fork as one of the most ecologically important forks of the Saline.
- ▶ The existing Alum Fork Natural Area already protects 520 acres of critical habitat in three tracts of land. Connecting these existing tracts will enhance habitat connectivity and establish a large block of contiguous protected land.
- ▶ Land ownership in this region is characterized by large blocks owned by a few industrial and individual landowners, thus making acquisition of large blocks feasible.
- ▶ This area adjoins the Ouachita National Forest, and protecting adjacent lands will result in greater habitat connectivity.
- ▶ Creating a large block of land under a collaboratively managed "Conservation Recreation Area" will provide additional recreational opportunities in this region, with particular opportunities for fishing, hiking and possibly gravel biking (in partnership with Green Bay)
- ▶ We will pursue financial incentives to help private landowners keep their lands undeveloped (e.g., carbon projects, etc).



### **STREAMBANK STABILIZATION**

Multiple funding sources may exist to help private landowners implement projects to stabilize their streambanks along the Saline River and its tributaries, thus reducing erosion and sediment. We will collaboratively explore, identify and pursue multiple funding opportunities to implement streambank stabilization practices throughout the upper watershed of the Saline River. These could include grants administered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and others. Many of these grant programs have been bolstered by the Inflation Reduction Act, and we will seek to capitalize on these additional, temporary funds.

### **STATE/FEDERAL ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATIONS**

Sediment runoff from construction sites can significantly degrade water quality, disrupt aquatic habitats and harm the diverse species that occur in the Saline. Existing regulations stipulate certain practices must be deployed on construction sites to limit sediment loss into waterways (e.g., silt fences, vegetative cover, etc.), but stakeholders perceive these regulations are not consistently enforced throughout the Saline River upper watershed. The Arkansas Division of Environmental Quality is responsible for enforcing these laws and regulations and does so based on complaints from the general public. We recommend exploring a collaborative and multifaceted approach that will both educate developers about regulatory requirements and inform those interested in the Saline River about regulations surrounding development and reporting options. This collaborative effort ensures that the Saline River continues to be a thriving natural asset for generations to come, balancing developmental needs with the imperative of environmental stewardship.

### **COMMUNITY PLANNING/SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

We will seek to build a coalition around community planning, with the mission to balance conservation of the area's natural resources with promotion of responsible development. Outcomes would be to explore Saline County legislation to guide development in key areas, provide positive reinforcement through tax incentives to developers who adopt best management practices, and provide expertise and guidance to communities and developers on planning.

### **UNPAVED ROADS**

Unpaved roadways represent a significant contributor to sediment and other pollution in rural areas, including the upper watershed of the Saline River. The Arkansas Unpaved Roads Program, administered by the Arkansas Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Division in partnership with the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, aims to improve water quality by reducing sediment runoff from unpaved roads. The program offers training and education for local road managers, technical assistance for designing and implementing road improvement projects and grants to support best management practices such as installing sediment control structures, stabilizing road surfaces and improving drainage systems.

By leveraging the resources and expertise available through the Arkansas Unpaved Roads Program, we can enhance the management of unpaved roads in the Saline River watershed. This will improve road conditions and reduce sedimentation, benefiting water quality and aquatic habitats.

## **Recreation**

The Saline River offers a diverse range of recreational opportunities that cater to outdoor enthusiasts of all kinds. The River is a prime destination for fishing, with various stretches providing ideal conditions for bank, wade and boat fishing. It represents a popular paddlecraft destination, with the stretches of the river between Moore Ford and Saline Crossing recognized as an Arkansas Water Trail, featuring accessibility and reliable flows. Snorkeling is growing in popularity, and there seems to be an opportunity to grow this activity on the Saline. In addition to water-based activities, the Saline River's surrounding natural areas offer excellent opportunities for hiking, camping, biking and wildlife watching.

Based on input from stakeholders and analysis of the planning committee, we recommend, focusing on primary initiatives to enhance recreational opportunities on the Saline River over the next five years:

1. Enhancing the recreational opportunities on the Saline River between Moore Ford and Saline Crossing.
2. Developing recreational opportunities in the upper section of Alum Fork, as part of the Alum Fork Conservation Area project detailed in the Conservation section.

### **ENHANCE RECREATION BETWEEN MOORE FORD AND SALINE CROSSING**

This section of the Saline River has particular potential to grow recreational values because:

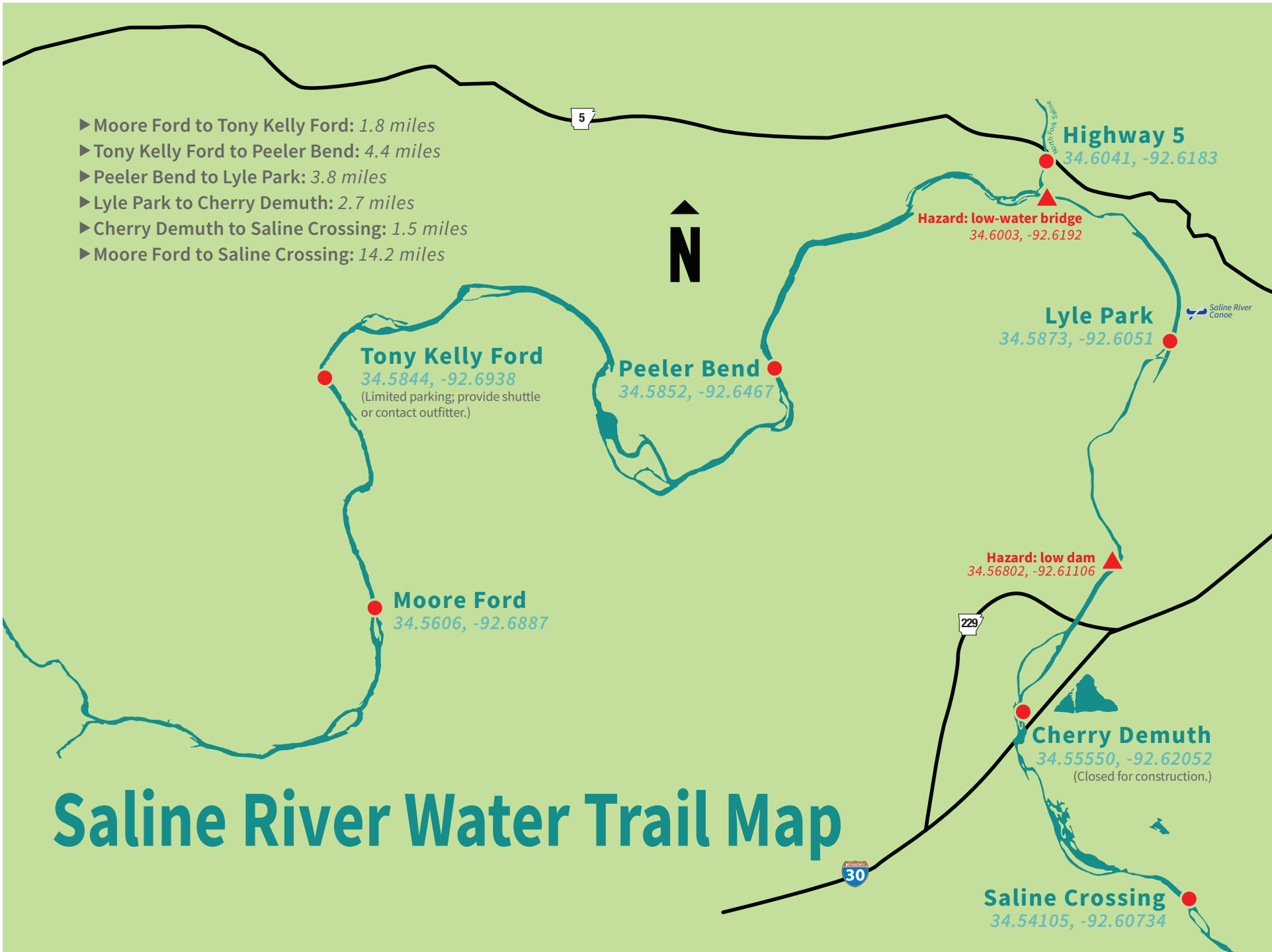
- ▶ It already is recognized and managed by Arkansas Game and Fish Commission as an Arkansas water trail ([www.agfc.com/things-to-do/water-trails/saline-river-water-trail/](http://www.agfc.com/things-to-do/water-trails/saline-river-water-trail/)).
- ▶ It has the greatest opportunity to serve the growing population of the greater Little Rock region
- ▶ It represents the reach where key stakeholders have greatest interest and focus
- ▶ It has a good base infrastructure already in place (access points, food service, etc)
- ▶ It has reliable flows throughout much of the year

To enhance and better develop recreation along this reach, we recommend (in priority order):

1. Improve access points and focus them to serve specific recreational pursuits (see below)
2. Develop a collaborative partnership and approach to remove hazards in the river and keep it navigable
3. Significantly increase law enforcement along the river
4. Explore a modification to the low-water dam to remove a safety hazard and enhance recreation
5. Develop a public greenspace on the Goat's Beard Bluff Natural Area for paddlers and anglers
6. Provide better and more curated information about recreational opportunities (e.g., access points, river levels, amenities, etc)
7. Explore a better comprehensive waste management plan for the area to reduce trash in the river

### **IMPROVE ACCESS POINTS**

Stakeholders do not believe a strong need exists for additional river access points between Moore Ford and Saline Crossing, but rather that existing access points should be improved. Below is a summary of each access point's positives and negatives, recommendations for improvement and priority\*. Priority rankings should inform where and how to spend resources as they become available, not the general importance of any access point. For example, Lyle Park is a popular and important access point, but already has good infrastructure in place for parking, boat ramps, etc. and doesn't need significant additional investments, so it has a "Low" ranking.



**SALINE RIVER RECREATIONAL ACCESS POINTS: STATUS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Location	Status	Positives	Problems	Focus Uses	Recommendations	Priority*
Moore Ford	Unmanaged	Good road access, large area of high ground close to the river for parking/future amenities	Lawlessness, vandalism, and disorderly conduct	Boat access	Acquire land for and develop parking lot, install signage, increase law enforcement presence	Moderate
Tony Kelly	Unmanaged	Popular access point for paddlers, ideal one-day float to Lyle Park (9 miles)	Poor parking, not accessible to trailers, lots of trash	Boat access	Acquire land for and develop better parking lot	Moderate
Peeler Bend	Managed (Saline County)	Very popular access point, ideal one-day float to Saline Crossing (8 miles)	Parking is a serious issue, trash can be abundant	Boat access	Install parking signage and directions in the short term; explore feasibility of a larger parking lot in the longer term	High
Hwy 5	Managed (AGFC)	Very popular, great access for swimming, family picnics, etc., amenities close by	Not great for inexperienced boaters	Family recreation (swimming, picnicking, etc), wade fishing	Develop as a family recreation area and wade fishing access point	Low
Lyle Park	Managed (City of Benton)	Great parking, outfitter presence	Needs better overflow parking, riprap is dangerous to access river	Boat access, bank fishing	Develop better overflow parking, make a better walking path to the river, Develop restroom options	Low
Cherry Demuth	Managed (City of Benton)	Lots of room for parking, popular location, accessible, owned by City of Benton, good boat ramp	Previously used illicitly as an ORV area, needs more law enforcement	Boat access, family recreation (swimming, picnicking, etc)	TBD after bridge construction, could need bathrooms for family activities	Low
Saline Crossing	Co-managed (City of Benton + partners)	Good boat ramp, good place for bank fishing, will have good amenities once completed (bathrooms, etc)	Final site plans will create a premier access point for the Saline River and Southwest Trail, but all funding is not secured to complete it.	Boat access, bank/wade fishing, trailhead access	Leverage and combine resources to complete the project.	High





### Program

- 1 EXISTING ASPHALT DRIVE
- 2 TRAILER PARKING
- 3 STRIPED 90 DEGREE PARKING
- 4 ASPHALT TURNAROUND W/ POROUS CONC. BLOCK
- 5 SIGNAGE
- 6 STONE STREAM-BANK STABILIZATION
- 7 EXISTING PRIVATE DRIVE
- 8 EXISTING BOAT RAMP
- 9 PEDESTRIAN WALKWAY W/ RETAINING WALL
- 10 STONE RIVER BANK STABILIZATION AND ACCESS

1" = 40'

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# Site Plan - Turnaround

Peeler Bend River Access

## **RIVER DEBRIS AND HAZARDS**

Stakeholders noted that debris in the river – trees, in particular – represents a considerable safety risk for paddlers and other recreationists on the river. Currently, the only way debris is removed is via private citizens doing it voluntarily. As we enhance and grow recreational opportunities on this section of the Saline and public use increases, it will be more important to maintain the River’s safe navigability in a consistent and fair manner.

Many avenues may exist to accomplish this, but we recommend developing a model whereby multiple partners fund a central operation to identify and remove hazardous debris from the River. A comparable model exists in Tennessee with the West Tennessee River Basin Authority. The WTRBA is a quasi-state agency responsible for managing and conserving the water resources of the West Tennessee region. The WTRBA’s mission includes flood control, water quality improvement and the preservation and restoration of natural habitats within the river basins of West Tennessee. Notably, a significant portion of the WTRBA’s responsibility is to maintain the navigability of rivers by identifying and removing debris. They are funded by a combination of federal, state, local and grant funds.

In developing a similar program for the Saline River, it is crucial to emphasize the conservation needs of the river. Any debris removal should be conducted with minimal impact on the natural environment, ensuring that essential habitats are preserved. The removal operations must follow standard methods that prioritize environmental sensitivity and sustainability. This includes using techniques that minimize disturbance to the riverbed and surrounding vegetation.

## **LAW ENFORCEMENT**

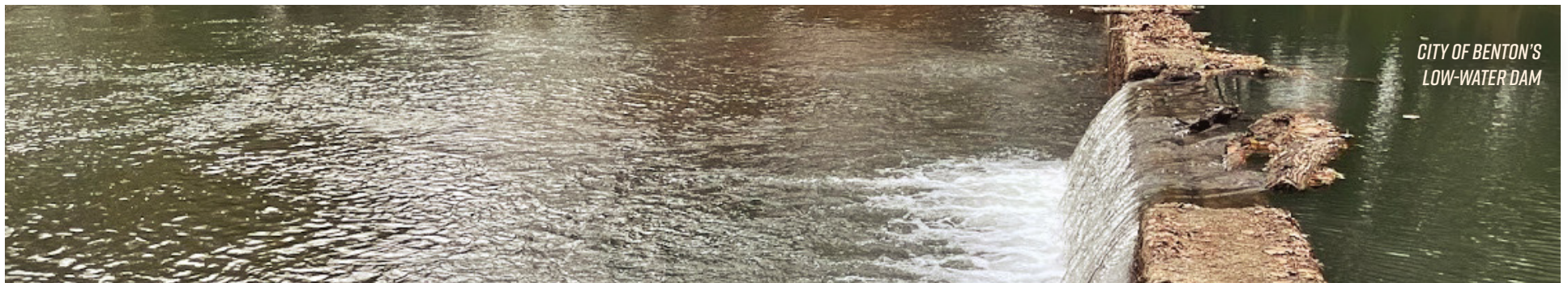
Stakeholders reported that recreationists often violate Arkansas’s public intoxication laws while recreating on the Saline, thereby endangering themselves, others and private property. Further, they noted that law enforcement officers rarely patrol the Saline River between Moore Ford and Saline Crossing to enforce these laws. We recommend greater collaboration among state and local agencies to provide more capacity in law enforcement on the Saline River between Moore Ford and Saline Crossing, and particularly during weekends in late spring and early summer.

## **LOW-WATER DAM MODIFICATION FOR SAFETY AND RECREATION**

The City of Benton currently maintains a low-water dam at their water treatment facility to ensure an adequate water supply during periods of low flows. At some river levels, this does not constitute a safety hazard, but at others, it can create a hydraulic hazard that endangers the safety of paddlers. Addressing this issue not only mitigates a significant human safety risk but also presents an opportunity to enhance the river’s ecological health and recreational value.

We recommend a study to explore the feasibility of modifying this low-water dam to remove the hazard and instead create a safe and accessible whitewater park. Whitewater parks are becoming increasingly popular across the U.S., offering a novel and highly desirable recreational asset. Creating one in Benton could be a valuable asset for local paddlers as well as a significant tourism opportunity.

In addition to removing a safety hazard and developing a new recreational asset, this project could be designed to improve fish passage. The varied benefits of this project could allow pursuing funds from multiple sources, including infrastructure, conservation, public utility and recreation funding.



## GOAT'S BEARD BLUFF NATURAL AREA

As use of the Saline River increases, there will be greater opportunity for conflicts with private landowners as recreationalists seek out riverside places for picnicking, swimming, etc. While this growth may, in the future, result in the need for multiple riverside greenspaces, the current public land encompassed by the Goat's Beard Bluff is not currently developed as a recreational area. We recommend developing a small picnic area on the banks of the Saline River within this natural area, and include it on maps and signage. The picnic area would only be accessible by the river or by foot. Further, we will work together to leverage funding and capabilities to build a parking lot for public access at the road entrance to Goat's Beard Bluff.

## OTHER POTENTIAL INITIATIVES

**Better information:** Stakeholders reported that information about the Saline River recreational opportunities can be difficult to find, particularly for novice recreationalists and tourists. At the same time, many seemed unaware of existing informational resources, and novice recreationists and tourists typically get information from Saline River Canoe. While this holds value, we're prioritizing initiatives with greater current impact.

**Waste management:** Stakeholders also voiced strong opinions that the amount of trash in the Saline River is unacceptable. Some suggested the creation and implementation of a more comprehensive regional waste management plan. However, the pathway forward and specific strategies of this are unclear, so it warrants additional thought and study.





**ARKANSAS'S SALINE RIVER CONSERVATION AND RECREATION PLAN**

