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The purpose of my testimony is give my best objective overview of the recent debacle known as the National Blueways designation that the White River received and where it went wrong in north central Arkansas. The story is long, complex, and has many individual players, but i will condense to the shortest and most simple explanation.

The concept of the Blueways is good. That is to promote and facilitate co-operation between all stakeholders in highly valuable watersheds. Our White River watershed was chosen as the 2nd such waterway in the entire USA. We can and should be proud of that attention. Although the concept is good, everything else went south after that.

Where the Federal and State agencies really messed up is that they had meetings - several meetings - with each other. They forgot to, or just did not invite the private landowners. In most cases, these are the same landowners already working with state agencies to do the right things on the rivers. If there is one constant among the Republicans, Democrats, Independents, and even the non-voting population in our part of the Ozarks is that we don't trust government. By not inviting the landowners and other interested parties, those people and organizations never felt a part of the program. They never felt like stakeholders.

There has been a fairly large movement of the Tea Party in north central Arkansas for a number of years. Smaller, more issue focused groups similar to the Tea Party - namely Secure Arkansas and the Patriots are also playing the part of vocal watchdogs which puts action into the mistrust of government.

Regarding mistrust of our government, in the Federalist #49 titled "Method of Guarding Against the Encroachments of Any One Department of Government by Appealing to the People Through a Convention, James Madison wrote the following:

Should an unwarrantable measure of the federal government be unpopular in particular States, which would seldom fail to be the case, or even a warrantable measure be so, which may sometimes be the case, the means of opposition to it are powerful and at hand. The disquietude of the people; their repugnance and, perhaps refusal to cooperate with officers of the Union, the frowns of the executive magistracy of the State; the embarrassment created by legislative devices, which would often be added on such occasions, would oppose, in any State, very serious impediments; and were the sentiments of several adjoining States happen to be in Union, would present obstructions which the federal government would hardly be willing to encounter.

When news broke that everyone in the White River watershed should be proud because we have just been chosen as volunteers in this new government program, it did not go over too well. We are a huge volunteer community. We believe strongly in volunteering and giving to our neighbors. We do not believe that our government should choose us as volunteers for programs that we have never even heard of. We felt more like victims than volunteers.

This feeling of victim, and the barking of the area watchdog groups, built the anxiety or disquietude to which Madison referred, eventually, ending with the action that he predicted to happen - refusal to cooperate...  
...with the union.

At first, the Federal and State agencies were shocked that the land owners could not see all the good that the government was wanting to do for us, with us. But as more parts of the program came into question, and the people's fear grew, our State's agencies began to understand that they would not be able to work with unwilling landowners. Especially not with landowners who are quite put off by having their cooperation and land assumed available for such a program without even being invited to the party first. The agencies could see that pushing forward would only jeopardize the currently good relationship that most agencies already have with most landowners in the watershed.

Our state's agencies wisely then withdrew from the program, admitted that they were mistaken to not have included private stakeholders in the planning process, and asked that the Feds withdraw the designation of the White River Blueways. Without state or private partners, there is no program to implement. Again, referring to James Madison's writing - ...present obstructions which the federal government would hardly be willing to encounter.

Arkansas is always at the top of national charts in regards to charity giving and volunteering. We will continue doing the same - on our own terms - not the terms of those receiving the benefit of cooperation and giving.