

President William Jefferson Clinton Visits New River

THE WHITE HOUSE
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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT DESIGNATION OF THE NEW RIVER AS
AN AMERICAN HERITAGE RIVER

Boggs Community Farm
Ashe County, North Carolina

1:08 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you for the warm welcome. Thank you for being here. Thank you, Sheila Morgan. Didn't she do a good job? (Applause.)

I want to --

VOICE FROM AUDIENCE: We love you, Mr. President!

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, ma'am. (Laughter.)

I want to thank all of you. I want to especially thank my good friend, Governor Hunt, America's premier and senior governor on so many issues and especially the education of our children. He's done a wonderful job for you. (Applause.)

I want to thank Congressman Burr for his statement, his commitment, his support of this project, and proving once again that at its best, America's commitment to our natural environment and our children's future is a bipartisan effort. (Applause.)

I want to thank Congressman Rahall, my good friend from West Virginia, for reminding us that Virginia and West Virginia are also a part of the New River designation, and very proud of it.

I thank Chair of the Federal Advisory Commission, Dayton Duncan and the other members who are here today; the Chair of the American Heritage River Alliance, Peter Stroh. I think the North Carolina Poet Laureate, Fred Chappell, is here, and I thank him for coming. I hope he'll write a poem about this.

I want to say to Chairman Yeats and Mayors Baldwin, Brown, and Hightower, we're glad to be here in your neighborhood.

I would like to say a special word of thanks to the Vice President for the magnificent record he has established in protecting our environment and in so many other areas of our national life. (Applause.) And to my great, good friend, Erskine Bowles, perhaps the most effective Chief of Staff any President ever had, and a relentless promoter of North Carolina and the New River. (Applause.)

I think the Vice President would agree with me when I say on October 1st we will close our books on the old budget year and open our books on the new one, and for the first time in 29 long years America is going to have a balanced budget and a surplus, thanks in no small measure to Erskine Bowles' leadership. (Applause.)

I want to thank all the people who made this day possible, the young people, the River Builders; I thank the young AmeriCorps volunteers who are here. (Applause.) I thank all the older people who also worked hard. I don't know how in the world you all got this place outfitted for this many people in no more time than you had to work on it, but I hope we could all join one more time in thanking Bill and Lula Severt and their family. The Severts have been great to make us at home in their home. (Applause.) Thank you, bless you.

Can you imagine how he felt -- they said, how would you like to just take out a minute or two and a couple of weeks, Bill, to entertain the President, the Vice President, the Governor, two congressmen, and 6,500 of their closest friends. (Laughter.) Just another day on the farm. (Laughter.)

In just a few moments I will sign a proclamation making all this official, awarding our nation's first American Heritage Rivers designations to the New River, the Blackstone, and Woonasquatucket, the Connecticut, the Cuyahoga, the Detroit, the Hanalei, the Hudson, the Upper and Lower Mississippi, the Potomac, the Rio Grande, the St. Johns, the Upper Susquehanna and Lackawanna, and the Willamette. (Applause.) Those places tell you an awful lot about America. They span our history; they span our country; they capture our imagination.

I want to congratulate the communities that participated in all these -- all these -- designations, and also those who worked so hard who didn't quite make it this time. It was an amazing process.

You know, for five and a half years the Vice President and I have worked hard to honor one of our nation's oldest, most enduring values -- to preserve for future generations the Earth God gave us. That's really what this River Initiative is all about.

The First Lady has headed up our coming celebration moving toward the year 2000 of the millennium, starting a new century and a new thousand years. And she came up with this theme that we should honor the past and imagine the future. You may have seen a few days ago she went out to Fort McHenry, where the Star-Spangled Banner flew, to celebrate the restoration of the Star-Spangled Banner; then on to the home of Thomas Edison, Harriet Tubman, and then to George Washington's Revolutionary War headquarters -- the thing that got North Carolina into this country in the first place and put it in a position to give up Tennessee. (Laughter.)

So I think -- (looking at the Vice President) -- he's laughing. (Laughter.) I'll hear about that later. (Applause.)

What we do to day is an important part of honoring our past and it's far more distant, and it also will stretch far, far into the future. Like the ring of a stately old oak, the currents of our rivers carry remarkable stories.

The New River tells stories of a region, the Southern Appalachian region, where tight-knit communities remain true to tradition, where neighbors share a vision of wise stewardship of water and land. It tells the stories of our emerging nation, for Colonel Peter Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson's father, surveyed this river, and Daniel Boone trapped here for beaver and bear.

It tells stories of earlier settlement through tools left by the Canaway, Cherokee, and Creek. It tells the story of our planet, for scientists can tell by the river's location and direction of flow that it is not only the oldest river in North America, but the second oldest river on the face of the Earth. (Applause.)

The other American Heritage Rivers all have compelling stories of their own, but there is one story all these rivers share -- the story of communities rallying around their rivers the way neighbors rally around each other in time of need or to get something done in the community.

Sheila talked about what you did here. In each and every community that won this designation -- and, I add, those who came close -- and there were dozens of them -- we were simply overwhelmed by the cooperation between interests who often disagree, and by the creative but practical plans forged by communities for protecting natural resources, spurring revitalization of the economy, and preserving cultural heritage.

Now we intend to work with you to realize our plans. This is the beginning, not the end, of this celebration. (Applause.) First, let me say, there will be no federal mandates, no restrictions on property holders' rights. Our goal instead is to help local groups enhance

historic rivers and make them attractive and commercially vibrant even as we preserve their environmental characteristics.

Here, for example, we'll start working with the New River Heritage Task Force to help family farmers increase their incomes with alternative crops and innovative techniques, while cutting the flow of pollutants into the river. On the Detroit River we'll help to revitalize an urban waterfront to bring new opportunity to downtown Detroit. On the St. Johns River we will help to control future floods and enhance environmental protection for rare species like the manatee. On each and every one of these rivers, we will help to unite our communities to further our country's river renaissance.

For nearly three decades now, as the Congressman said earlier and as the Vice President echoed, our nation has made strong, visible, bipartisan progress in cleaning up our environment, while enhancing our economy at the same time. Today our economy is the strongest in a generation, but we also have cleaner air, cleaner water, fewer toxic waste dumps, safer food, the cleanest environment in a generation. And we should be proud of that. The two go hand in hand. (Applause.)

I want to talk a little politics, but not partisan politics, with you. Jim Hunt and I were riding out here, and I looked at all those folks waving to me with their American flags. And I said, Jim, is this a Democrat area or a Republican area? (Laughter.) He said, it's about 50-50. He said, it comes and goes. (Laughter.) I said, kind of like America.

Well, I want to ask you to manifest the bipartisan or nonpartisan commitment I see in this crowd today to the environment in your voices in Washington, because some folks in Congress are no longer committed to bipartisan progress on the environment. They really do see, I believe honestly, polluted streams and fields or noxious air as overstated problems that can be put off for another day.

We can only deal with this if we have progress, not partisanship, because here are the facts: today 40 percent of our waters are still too polluted for fishing and swimming. That's why I launched the Clean Water Action Plan to help communities finish the job that the Vice President mentioned. So far, Congress has refused to fully fund this initiative. I ask them to reconsider. I think every child in America ought to have the same chance your children do to fish or swim or float on a river that's clean and pure. (Applause.)

We need progress, not partisanship, to protect our land. Last February, several months ago, I submitted a list of 100 new sites we can add to our nation's endowment of protected lands, including a beautiful site here in the southern Appalachians along the trout-rich Thompson River. While Congress has appropriated the money to preserve

these natural and historic treasures, under the law the leadership must approve the release of the funds. And so far they haven't done it. So today I ask again, let's work together to protect these wonders. The money is in the bank, the sites have been identified, they're not going anywhere, but we need to preserve them for everyone for all time.

We also need to work together to meet the challenge of climate change, which has already been mentioned by the Governor and others. Let me tell you, folks, the first time I had a long talk with Al Gore, he showed me this book he wrote, "Earth in the Balance," which I had already read and understood about half of. (Laughter.) And he whipped out this chart showing how much more elements we were putting in the air in the form of greenhouse gases that were heating the planet.

And I listened and it made a lot of sense to me, but I didn't know anybody who believed it -- or at least not enough to actually come up with a plan. Well, now we know that the nine hottest years in history have occurred in the last 11 years, that the five hottest years in history have occurred in the 1990s, that 1997 was the hottest year ever recorded on Earth, and every month of 1998 has broken the 1997 record in America. And I'm glad the clouds came up and made me cool while I'm saying that. (Applause.)

But there is a way, just like there has always been a way. Since we started doing this in 1970, there has always been a way for us to preserve the environment and grow the economy. There is a way for us to meet the challenge of climate change and global warming and continue to grow the economy. We just have to be innovative and we have to be willing to change.

And again, I have not proposed a lot of big, burdensome new regulations; I have proposed tax incentives and investments in new technologies and partnerships so we can reduce the harmful fumes we put into the atmosphere from transportation, from construction, from utilities, from all the work we do. We can do this. This is not going to be that hard once we make up our mind.

But I can tell you, we can never do it unless there are Democrats and Republicans for it. We never make any real progress on any great challenge unless we go forward together. And I ask you to ask our country to go forward as you have gone forward together here. (Applause.) We need these programs for energy efficiency, renewable energy, and tax incentives. They've long enjoyed the support of business and environmentalists; they should enjoy the support of Congress.

And we also need to stop using legislative gimmicks in Washington to weaken environmental protection. In the Senate, for example, lawmakers have attached to bills

that are totally unrelated devices called riders that would cripple our wildlife protection efforts, deny taxpayers a fair return on oil leasing on public lands, allow a \$30-million road through a wildlife refuge in Alaska -- the first road ever through a federal wilderness. We don't need to do this. We need to keep going forward.

Look out at that river and just imagine -- just try to imagine what it would be like to be 300 million years old. (Laughter.) I'm grateful for our economic prosperity. I'm grateful for the fact that the crime rate is down, and we have the smallest percentage of our people on welfare in 29 years. I'm grateful for these things. (Applause.) But you know and I know that the world is still changing fast, that there are many challenges out there that were trying to meet right now -- the challenge of the problems that our friends in Asia have which could affect the whole world economy, just for example. We're trying to deal with wars of racial and religious and ethnic hatred that could spill into other countries and engage our young people again.

We know that we will have future challenges because in the nature of things, once you solve one set of problems there's always a new set of challenges coming along. That's one of the gifts that God has given us. So we'll always have new challenges, but you'll always have the New River, too. (Applause.)

For those of us who are old enough to be parents or grandparents, we know when our children and grandchildren are our age the facts of their lives might be a little different. It's kind of heartening to know, isn't it, that the New River will be the same because of what you are doing here today.

This ancient river has flowed through the heart of this land for millions of years -- hundreds of millions of years longer than blood has flowed through any human heart. The Cherokee even say that this was the very first river created by the Great Spirits' hand. Who are we, such brief visitors, on this Earth to disturb it? But when we cherish it and save it and hand it on to our children, we have done what we were charged to do, not only in our own Constitution and history, but by our Maker.

You should be very, very proud of yourselves today. I thank you for what you have done. God bless you. (Applause.)