

Testimony of Trey Basset on:
H.R. 5923, *Walnut Grove Land Exchange Act*
July 17, 2018

Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Hanabusa, (*pronounced Hannah – boo – saah*), thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is George Joseph Bassett III, but everyone knows me as Trey. I am a deacon and the treasurer of the Walnut Grove Community Church. Our Church is located off Highway 298 in Jessierville, Arkansas, inside the Ouachita National Forest. I am here today to talk about H.R. 5923, the *Walnut Grove Land Exchange Act*.

I have been attending Walnut Grove Community Church since the fall of 1997. I was ordained as a deacon in 2011 and became the church treasurer in 2013. My wife Janis and my three daughters Lexi, Harli and Presli are also members of the Church. Janis is a preschool and Sunday school teacher, and is a fourth-generation member of our church. Janis's great grandparents, John and Effie Johnson and Jim and Rosetta Teal were among those involved in the relocation of the church in 1938 to its present-day site within the National Forest. Our church attendance averages 80 to 100 weekly, which may not sound like much, but for a small church in rural Arkansas, we are pleased with the growth in attendance over the last 8+ years. Our growing numbers is one of the reasons I am here in front of you today.

Arminda and Clarinda Riley, why are these names important? They are the oldest legible headstones in the cemetery. Why bring this up? These two grave sites were the foundation of our Cemetery, approximately 34 years before the establishment of the United States Forest Service. Walnut Grove/ Rock Springs Cemetery is incredibly important to both our church, and the surrounding community. Along with the numerous service men laid to rest there, the Cemetery is where we honor our sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, grandparents and other congregation members that have passed on.

In 1938, Walnut Grove Community Church was moved from approximately a mile away to its present-day location within the Ouachita National Forest, to be closer to the cemetery. The first service in the church was held in 1939, sadly a funeral service for the newborn infant of Irvin and Mary Teal. Since that service nearly 80 years ago, our church has hosted community meetings, served as a

Search and Rescue command post, and more. There have been hundreds of weddings – including my own – along with, baptisms, baby dedications, and funerals. It is my hope, with the passage of H.R. 5923, that one day my daughters can also have their weddings at Walnut Grove, and the Church can continue to serve the community for generations to come.

Now that you know some of the history of our church, I would like to discuss the issue fixed by H.R. 5923. For all the history within our doors and preserved in our adjacent cemetery, we do not own the land we worship on. The cemetery, and land under the church itself – is federal property.

From the outset, the Church operated under a Forest Service special use permit, allowing our congregation to worship on the property in exchange for upkeep and maintenance of the cemetery. When that use permit expired in 2000, we attempted to purchase the property from the Forest Service, but did not reach an agreement. We then signed a new special use permit, instituting the yearly fee we currently pay to worship at our Church. This special use permit requires a yearly renewal with the Forest Service, which has the authority to increase our rate or simply not renew our permit if they so choose. While however unlikely, it is within the Forest Service's power to walk away from that permit for any reason, essentially evicting us.

In 2004, 6 acres of land was donated to the church by one of our members, William Johnson. Mr. Johnson, a WWII POW who is buried in the cemetery, donated the land upon his passing for the sole purpose of facilitating a land exchange with the Forest Service. We approached the Service, and they declined. In 2006, we tried again, with help of former Representative Mike Ross, but that was also unsuccessful. At the time, the Forest Service told us that if we took over paying the special use permit fees for the cemetery, in addition to the fees paid for the church, it would be easier to complete the trade. In 2007 we did so, paying both the fees for the church and for the cemetery, but the Forest Service again declined the trade. Several additional attempts to facilitate an exchange were made between 2008 and 2016, with no results. At the end of 2016, I contacted Congressman Westerman about a solution. Through hard work, Congressman Westerman and his staff have gotten us to today, as I sit before you asking for swift passage of H.R. 5923.

As I stated in the beginning, with a youth group of 35 and growing and an average attendance of 100 people, we are outgrowing our 80-year-old building, and need more classrooms and places for youth to gather in a protected and positive atmosphere. With the current ownership, we are not able to make the needed improvements to our property, building or parking areas, as any alterations requires permission from the Forest Service. Throughout the last 20+ years, we as a congregation have tried to go through the proper channels, have done everything we have been asked to do to make this land trade a reality, but with no results. This bill is the closet we have gotten to finally acquiring the land.

In conclusion I hope this information is helpful for a positive decision for the church and the congregation. The church understands its responsibilities in the process and will be willing to do whatever is necessary to complete the transaction.

I want to thank Congressman Westerman and his staff for the time and energy they have put into this bill, and I want to thank the Committee for taking the time today to listen. I hope this testimony, and any questions you have following, helps the Walnut Grove Community Church serve the people of Jessieville for years to come.