



WESTERN
CATTLE
TRAIL
ASSOCIATION



**Testimony of Ron Wilson, Legislative Chair, International Chisholm Trail Association
before the
House Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
November 9, 2021**

**Regarding H.R. 2512 which would designate the Chisholm National Historic Trail and the
Western National Historic Trail as part of the National Trails System**

Chair Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for conducting this hearing and thank you for the opportunity to provide our comments in strong support of H.R. 2512. I want to take this moment to commend you for the work this committee does on behalf of our citizens so that they might experience our nation's historic, cultural, and environmental heritage. Thank you for your service.

I am Ron Wilson, a Kansas rancher, a faculty member at Kansas State University, and volunteer legislative chair of the International Chisholm Trail Association. The primary mission of the International Chisholm Trail Association is to identify, preserve, develop, and promote the old Chisholm Trail for education and heritage tourism purposes. More than 200 members from across the nation are members of our association. We are partnering with the Western Cattle Trail Association to support this bill to designate both the Chisholm and Western Trails as national historic trails while concurrently protecting private property rights of adjacent landowners. We applaud Congressman Ron Estes and the other House cosponsors for their support of this legislation.

In 1968, Congress enacted the National Trails System Act and within it, stated that the "old cattle trails of the Southwest" should be considered for addition to a national trails system. In 1978, Congress expanded upon the existing Scenic and Recreational trails categories to add a category for Historic trails, which is where the cattle trails would fit. In 2009, Congress directed the U.S. Department of the Interior to conduct such a study for these cattle trails. The Department of the Interior tasked its National Park Service (NPS) to complete it. After a decade of extensive research and community outreach, the Department of the Interior reported in 2019 that public comments were overwhelmingly supportive and that both the Chisholm and Western trails meet the criteria for National Historic Trail designation. We appreciate the outstanding efforts of the staff members from the National Park Service's National Trails Intermountain Region in Santa Fe, New Mexico who led these research efforts.

The trails were found to be of national significance in four ways: 1. Developing the American economy through exchange and trade; 2. Developing the American economy through distribution, consumption, transportation, and communication; 3. Peopling places; and 4. Expressing cultural values. We strongly agree with these findings.

The study recommended that the trails be designated separately as the Chisholm National Historic Trail and Western National Historic Trail and be administered as a single administrative unit. We concur with this finding as well.

In the post-Civil War era, there was no easy or inexpensive way to bring longhorn cattle north to markets from cash-poor but cattle-rich Texas. However, entrepreneurial Texans chose to walk their cattle north in what was called a cattle drive to railheads in Kansas. As they moved north, these multicultural cowboys – sometimes called drovers - followed a route that was blazed by Native American trader Jesse Chisholm through modern-day Oklahoma and Kansas. This route spanned much of that distance and affected the character and development of communities along its route. The Chisholm Trail would be a major cattle trail through the early 1870s, but westward settlement and other factors would lead the drovers onto the new Western Trail. The Western Trail ultimately carried even more cattle and herded them as far north as Nebraska and beyond, well into the 1890s. Up to ten million head of cattle were moved north on these trails to markets in the midwestern and eastern states. The development and intensive use of these trails played an important role in the economic recovery of the region in the post-Civil War era. Eventually, continued settlement and new railroad construction meant the end of the cattle trails. The diverse drovers and cowboys who rode these trails became enduring icons of courage, grit, and adventure. As one National Park Service document stated: “As a symbol of the west, these trails and their legacy vividly remain.”

These historic cattle trails had high economic impact then and they still have impact today. There is global interest in the history of the cattle trails. One state historic commission noted that travel research has demonstrated that learning about and discovering significant, authentic communities along celebrated heritage venues such as the national historic trails is a strong motivator for domestic and international travelers and that “research continues to show that more people are seeking travel experiences that connect them to local culture and unique stories.” Heritage tourism along the Chisholm and Western National Historic Trails should encourage exploration of our rural communities, including the diversity found along the trails.

The states and communities affected by such a designation have already developed some interpretive infrastructure on the trails so there is a strong basis upon which the NPS can build. As noted in the NPS study, given the nature of the times, there were various names applied to the trails at various places and times. As interpretive materials are developed for the trails, we believe they should share the full, inclusive history of the trails. Furthermore, the story of the cattle trails is a multicultural story, and these stories should be shared from this perspective as well in a respectful way. Contrary to some Hollywood portrayals, it is estimated that one quarter or more of the trail drovers were of African American, Hispanic, or Native American descent. We have been reaching out to partner organizations who have an interest in telling these stories as well.

Finally, I would note that the Chisholm Trail is named for Jesse Chisholm, an interpreter, trader, and historic peacemaker of Cherokee descent. He was said to be able to speak 14 different Native American languages. We believe that designating this historic trail in honor of Jesse Chisholm would show respect for this remarkable Native American and signal a commitment to greater inclusion and equity in the interpretation of the trails.

Chair Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and members of the Subcommittee, I am confident that the addition of the Chisholm and Western National Historic Trails to the National Trail System will uphold the fine standards that have been set by the other system trails in the last fifty years. We respectfully urge the Subcommittee to approve H.R. 2512 as introduced. Thank you for your consideration.