

West Virginia Highlands Conservancy
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Candy Darters Caught in the Crossroads

By Olivia Miller

On January 10, the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy joined Appalachian Voices, the Center for Biological Diversity, Greenbrier River Watershed Association, Kanawha Forest Coalition, and the Sierra Club in bringing a lawsuit against the United States Forest Service for failing to protect streams designated as critical habitat for the endangered candy darter from coal hauling in the Monongahela National Forest.

In the rugged terrain of the Cherry River Watershed, the streams that sustain life for the remaining stronghold population of the candy darter are interspersed with thousands of acres of strip mining and timber operations.



Environmental violations related to coal hauling in the South Fork Cherry River continue to pile up—jeopardizing the existence of the remaining native candy darter.

In this watershed—Laurel Creek and both the South and Nork Fork of the Cherry River are designated as critical habitat for the candy darter. The designation is intended to protect particular areas of a species' habitat that contain elements essential to supporting its life—meaning any harm to the streams will likely harm the fish.

Candy darters are native to the Upper Kanawha River Basin in West Virginia and Virginia. The enamoring bright orange and blue fish are found nowhere else in the world. The species was first documented in 1931 in Pocahontas County. Since then, half of the known candy darter populations have

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Thoughts From Our President

The month of January brought one of the most incredible snowstorms in recent memory to the West Virginia highlands. So far, Canaan Valley has seen 103.5 inches of snowfall. I hope you had the opportunity to enjoy the quiet and beauty of the surrounding mountains blanketed in snow. As the climate changes, every snowfall becomes ever more special. Signs of spring have started to peek through the hills, but old man winter has not moved on from the highlands just yet.

During the first month of the New Year, staff and committees of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy have hit the ground running. The West Virginia legislative session is a pivotal time for our organization, demanding our unwavering attention as we ensure the protection of the landscapes we hold dear.

As we navigate the ups and downs of this legislative session, your support and advocacy play a crucial role in our collective efforts to preserve our state's ecological treasures for generations to come.

This month's letter will provide a glimpse into the activities of WVHC so far in 2024.

During January WVHC:

- Supported West Virginia Rivers Coalition's Clean Water for All Event commemorating the 10th anniversary of the Elk River chemical spill. WVHC was represented at the event by Program Director Olivia Miller, Membership and Operations Director Crys Bauer, and Dolly Sods Wilderness Stewards Program Coordinator Dave Johnston.
- Held our first 2024 quarterly board meeting on January 10th at the Kanawha Public Library in Charleston. See the report on the meeting on

page 11. I want to thank everyone in attendance as it was a very productive meeting. It is increasingly difficult to keep up as lots of good and potentially concerning information surfaces every day.

- Our Highways and Public Lands Committees submitted a letter with partner groups to the Monongahela National Forest encouraging a higher-level National Environmental Policy Act review process for the Appalachian Corridor H Core Drilling Special Use Authorization. In the letter, we requested that the Monongahela National Forest preclude the use of a categorical exclusion to satisfy the NEPA review based on our concerns over the impact on extraordinary resource conditions and improper use of a categorical exclusion. Appalachian Voices, Stewards of the Potomac Highlands, Friends of Blackwater and the West Virginia Council of Trout Unlimited signed in support of the letter.
- Olivia Miller and Board Member Randy Kesling represented WVHC at a meeting with State Senator Mark Maynard, chairman of the Senate Outdoor Recreation Committee during the 2024 West Virginia Legislative Session. Mike Jones of West Virginians for Public Lands and Lucia Valentine and Isabel Stellato, lobbyists for the West Virginia Environmental Council, were also in attendance. The groups presented our priorities for public lands as set by the West Virginia Environmental Council and expressed concern over the environmental impacts of off-road vehicle trail expansion on our public lands.
- Joined conservation groups in filing a lawsuit against the U.S. Forest Service for failing to protect streams designated as critical habitat for the endangered candy darter in the Cherry

Are you on our email list?

Signing up to receive emails from the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy is your gateway to staying actively engaged in conservation efforts in West Virginia.

Staying informed with our action alerts during the legislative session will empower you to advocate for environmental policies that matter the most.

Sign up today at
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River watershed from harmful effects of coal hauling in the Monongahela National Forest. Read more about the lawsuit on page one.

- Our Renewable Energy Committee submitted comments in defense of net metering to the West Virginia Public Service Commission regarding First Energy's proposal to reduce the amount that it pays individual producers of solar power for the electricity their private solar panels add to the electricity grid. Read more about our comments on page eight.
- Our Public Lands Committee submitted comments on the scoping period for the proposed Land Management Direction for Old-Growth Forest Conditions Across the National Forest System amending all 128 National Forest Plans to restrict logging of old-growth and being guiding stewardship of future old-growth.
- WVHC continues to participate in the Central Appalachian Spruce Restoration Initiative, (CASRI). CASRI is comprised of private, state, federal, and non-governmental organizations which recognize the importance of

the red spruce ecosystem for its ecological, aesthetic, recreational, economic, and cultural values that have planted nearly 1,000,000 trees and released over 2,000 acres of red spruce. In West Virginia alone, the range of spruce-influenced forests has shrunk by between 450,000 acres and 1,350,000 acres since the late 1800's. With rapid landscape changes encroaching from climate change, we need to act quickly and effectively to restore our forests on a wider scale. WVHC supported CASRI's annual meeting at Blackwater Falls by covering the cost of the event space.

Thank you for your continued dedication to WVHC, and I look forward to updating you on the progress we make during this busy legislative session.

Sincerely,
Marilyn Shoenfeld, WVHC President

The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy is a non-profit corporation which has been recognized as a tax exempt organization by the Internal Revenue Service. Its bylaws describe its purpose: The purposes of the Conservancy shall be to promote, encourage, and work for the conservation—including both preservation and wise use—and appreciation of the natural resources of West Virginia and the nation, and especially of the Highlands Region of West Virginia, for the cultural, social, educational, physical, health, spiritual, and economic benefit of present and future generations of West Virginians and Americans.

WVHC 2024 Legislative Update

By Luanne McGovern

Editor's Note: When you receive your copy of the February issue of The Highlands Voice, this Legislative Update may be outdated. To keep close tabs on the session, make sure to sign up to receive our action alerts via email at <https://bit.ly/WVHCemailsingup> and follow WVHC on social media.

The 87th West Virginia Legislature started their 60-day session on January 10, 2024. So far, almost 2,000 bills have been introduced, outpacing last year's count. The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy has been monitoring a number of bills, in conjunction with our partners at the West Virginia Environmental Council. Here is an update on our main priorities for 2024:

Net Metering:

To protect and preserve long-standing net metering rules to ensure all solar users are entitled to the existing fair market retail rate. The WV Public Service Commission held a public hearing on January 22, 2024, to allow public comment on Mon Power and Potomac Edison's proposal to drastically reduce the amount that solar producers are paid for the power they generate. Dozens of speakers from across the state blasted the unfairness of the proposal and how it could cripple the nascent WV solar industry. The Public Service Commission has not yet ruled on the case and no legislation has been introduced.

To stay updated, visit: <https://www.energyfreedomwv.org/net-metering>

Orphaned Gas Well Responsibility:

To require bonds to be set before drilling begins to cover plugging costs for gas wells that are abandoned or orphaned. Senate Bill 532 – The Orphan Oil and Gas Well Prevention Act of 2024 – was introduced by Senators Smith, Caputo, Stover and Hamilton.

We are hoping that the bill will quickly move to Senator Smith's Energy Committee in the coming days. You can reach out to these Senators and let them know you want more industry responsibility to prevent orphaned wells in our state.

Community Solar:

To promote access to affordable renewable energy through a solar facility subscription service. House Bill 4834 - Establishing a community solar program for subscribers to gain credits against their utility bills - has been introduced by Delegates Hansen and Young. A companion bill is being drafted in the Senate and hopes are high that momentum can be established for passage this session.

Public Lands:

Several bills are under consideration in the Senate that impact public lands, and recognize the value that non-motorized recreation brings to the state:

- Senate Bill 196 - WV Rail Trails Program
- Senate Bill 425 - WV Public Waterway Access Act
- Senate Bill 426 - WV Recreational Trails Development Act

There are two troubling bills under consideration:

- Senate Bill 171 - Prohibiting county commissions from adopting authorization that exceeds state law regarding agriculture operations. This bill would centralize power at the state level and eliminate local government's ability to protect residents, businesses, and farmers. Last year's success at stopping the Hardy County log fumigation project would have been invalidated by this bill. You can sign the petition against this

bill here: <https://bit.ly/3HYH9Rz>

- HB5018 - To provide for Department of Environmental Protection oversight and authority governing community air monitoring programs. This dangerous bill would tell community members that their monitoring efforts and their inter-

est in being an ally in ensuring a healthy environment aren't worthy. If they are successful with air monitoring, they may come after our water monitoring programs. We have issued an Action Alert on this bill and hope to get it stopped in Committee.



During the second week of the legislative session, WVHC's Program Director Olivia Miller and Board Member Randy Kesling joined members of West Virginians for Public Lands and the WV Environmental Council for a visit to the state Capitol to discuss our shared vision for our wild and wonderful public lands with members of the Senate Outdoor Recreation Committee.

During the 2023 legislative session, we successfully fought back against attempts to allow motorized trails in all forests. Because of our collective voices, off-road vehicle trail expansion is prohibited in all WV State Parks and State Forests, except for the existing trail system at Cabwaylingo State Forest.

This victory was made possible because of all of the calls and emails made to representatives by our supporters. Your voice matters, and we need your support during this legislative session, too.

We will continue to work to support outdoor recreation activities that are compatible with our public lands, serve our communities, and nurture healthy ecosystems.

West Virginia Highlands Conservancy Online Store Catalog

Apparel

- **WVHC Cotton Hat (Black or Army Green):** \$22.50
- **WVHC Hemp Hat (Black or Green):** \$25.00
- **WVHC 100% Cotton T-Shirts (Coyote Brown, Kelly Green, Navy Blue, Black) Available in XS-XXL:** \$22.00
- **Black 50th Anniversary T-Shirt with "Celebrating 50 years" logo. Available in Small-XXL:** \$20.00
- **I Love Mountains T-Shirt Short Sleeve. Available in M-XXL:** \$18.00
- **I Love Mountains T-Shirt Long Sleeve. Available in S, M, L, XL:** \$22.00
- **I Love Mountains Toddler T-Shirts. Available in 18-months, 2T, 3T, 4T, 5/6:** \$20.00
- **Square Black Bandana:** \$5.00

Drinkware

- **WVHC Hydro Flask 20 oz. All Around Tumbler (Birch, Indigo, Black):** \$35.00
- **WVHC Hydro Flask 21 oz. Standard Mouth Flex Cap Water Bottle (Pacific, Mesa, Indigo):** \$45.00

Stickers

- **I Love Mountains Bumper Sticker:** \$3.00 for one, \$12.00 for 20

Books

- **Monongahela National Forest Hiking Guide, 9th Edition:** \$21.95
- **Fighting to Protect the Highlands:** \$15.95

To order by mail make checks payable to West Virginia Highlands Conservancy and send to P.O. Box 306, Charleston, WV 25321. Please indicate the item and relevant color and size if applicable. To view and purchase store items online, visit wvhighlands.org

BUMPER STICKERS

To get free I ♥ Mountains bumper sticker(s), send a SASE to P.O. Box 306, Charleston, WV, 25321. Slip a dollar donation (or more) in with the SASE and get two bumper stickers. Businesses or organizations wishing to provide bumper stickers to their customers/members may have them free. (Of course if they can afford a donation that will be gratefully accepted.)



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Please email any poems, letters, commentaries, etc. to the Voice editor at comms@wvhighlands.org or by real, honest to goodness, mentioned in the United States Constitution mail to WV Highlands Conservancy, PO Box 306, Charleston, WV 25321.

WVHC Comments to Public Service Commission in Support of Solar Power in West Virginia

By John McFerrin

The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy has made formal comments to the West Virginia Public Service Commission on the proposal to change the way it credits homeowners for the electricity they produce with their own solar system.

Almost all home solar systems are connected to the electricity grid. During the day, the homes produce more electricity than they need. This electricity goes into the electrical grid, available for use by other customers.

At night, and on cloudy days, these homeowners use more electricity than their systems produce. During those times, they import electricity from the grid. If, at the end of

the month, the homeowner has used more than he or she has exported to the grid, the homeowner is billed for the excess. The system is known as net metering.

Under the current system, the electricity the homeowner takes from the grid is the same price as the electricity which he or she supplies to the grid. The electric company credits the homeowner for the electricity supplied to the grid from the homeowner's system at the retail rate for electricity. It then charges the homeowner for electricity that the homeowner takes from the system produces at the same retail rate. In most situations, the amounts taken from the grid and supplied to the grid are

about the same so the homeowner's bill for electricity (not considering the service charge that First Energy imposes) is close to zero.

The Public Service Commission is considering a request by First Energy to change that. First Energy wants to start crediting homeowners for the electricity they send to the grid at the wholesale price. It would still charge those same homeowners the retail price for electricity it delivers to them. The result would be that the electricity leaving a home would be considered worth about half as much as the electricity entering the same home.

On behalf of its members, the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

has filed formal comments opposing the change. In those comments, WVHC emphasized that having electricity produced by solar power increases the stability of the electrical grid. It also helps fight climate change. The change which the PSC is considering would cripple, if not kill, the solar power industry in West Virginia. For these and other reasons the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy opposed the changes.

West Virginia Loses Veteran Environmental Movement Organizer



Shortly after midnight on January 16, 2024, Norm Steenstra, Jr, a founder of West Virginia's environmental movement, passed away at his home in Charleston, at the age of 72.

Mr. Steenstra was a grassroots environmental organizer and lobbied

to better the lives and health of his fellow West Virginians. He was one of the original founders of the WV Environmental Council back in the late 1980s. In the 1990's he helped to pass groundbreaking legislation in West Virginia that protected our groundwater, limited the dumping of out-of-state garbage and protected our air.

For more than a decade, Steenstra served as the executive director of West Virginia Citizen Action, a non-profit political watchdog organization responsible for organizing and providing guidance for West Virginia citizens on various issues

ranging from universal healthcare, environmental protection, labor & property rights and, registering voters and getting them out to vote.

"Norm was a remarkable leader and mentor for many who remain active in West Virginia's environmental movement and others who are working to create a government that is open, honest and accountable to the needs of our communities," said Gary Zuckett, a longtime friend and current Executive Director of WV Citizen Action. "He had a significant and positive impact on public policy in the Mountain State during his tenure. He leaves an outstanding legacy, but also a tremendous hole in our hearts."

Before the advent of social media, Mr. Steenstra was well known for his ability to quickly gather sever-

al hundred people for public events and protests. He was a tremendous communicator and was often able to work with opposing sides due to his skills at negotiating and being able to see the bigger picture.

After retiring from WV Citizen Action, he became director of the Kanawha County Solid Waste Authority. During the national economic downturn in 2006-2008, the facility was one of the few such facilities in the state to turn a profit, due to Steenstra's innovative and creative outlook on use of recycled materials.

Editor's Note: Norm Steenstra also served on the Board of Directors of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy.

Some Bright Spots in an Otherwise Rough West Virginia Legislative Session

By Quenton King

West Virginia is rough in the winter, and not just because of the cold. Since I moved back to the state in 2020, the culture war has been in full swing. LGBTQ rights and women's health care are under threat. Harm reduction has been attacked. It is difficult to even have a serious conversation about environment and climate policy at the state level.

(And of course they haven't contained the bad to just winter, like when the Legislature banned abortion in late summer of 2022.)

Most bills that are introduced, good or bad, don't pass. But it's hard to ignore some of the rhetoric I hear in committee meetings and on the House and Senate floors, or the clearly racist, bigoted, borderline fascist bills that some lawmakers have no qualms putting their names behind as they're introduced.

I don't know quite where I fall on the debate about whether it's better to draw attention to awful bills or to just ignore them outright. As a person of color, I can empathize with marginalized communities who feel threatened when bills are introduced that are built, by design, to threaten their existence. But that's a commentary for a different day.

All that is to say that the vibes are off annually around this time in West Virginia. However, two events in the last month have made me feel more optimistic than usual about the future when it comes to environmental advocacy at the legislature. I'll focus primarily on one.

This past weekend I attended the Save Our Solar Rally at the Capitol, hosted by West Virginians for Energy



Attendees at the Save Our Solar Rally held at the WV State Capitol on Jan. 27, 2024 in Charleston.

Freedom and other solar advocates. The rally was organized to call attention to the need to allow community solar in West Virginia ([which I wrote about last year](#)) and underscore the importance of protecting net metering, which is currently facing uncertainty at the Public Service Commission.

Net metering plays an important role in rapidly expanding solar energy and cleaning up our grid. The total cost for purchasing and installing panels for a home can often cost between \$20,000 and \$40,000. The homeowner should break more than even over the lifetime of the solar system thanks to reduced power bills. That could take 30 years. Net metering allows solar owners to sell their excess power back to the grid, which can make the prospect of going solar more cost-effective.

One of the state's two main electric providers has asked the PSC to halve the rate it credits solar customers going forward. The utility's reasoning is that people without solar are footing the bill for those who participate in net metering, which follows a national

trend that has seen net metering under attack. California's version of the PSC voted to reduce net metering rates effective April 2023. In the short time since, [solar installs have already plummeted](#), and an estimated [17,000 jobs could be lost](#), according to industry estimates.

Compared to its uptake in California, solar is still a relatively small industry in West Virginia. But the message from the solar rally was clear: the PSC and other policymakers should recognize the economic, environmental and grid-stabilizing benefits of distributed solar, and do everything it can to encourage it, rather than choke the life out of it while it's still a growing industry.

But back to the point — I left the rally feeling hopeful because of how many people came to the Capitol on a Saturday in January to be around others who care about the environment and affordable, clean energy. A local band performed, speeches were given, connections were made. Current workers in the solar industry and

homeowners with panels put the stakes in perspective — the solar industry provides good paying jobs across the state, and homeowners have already seen the benefits of their power bills cut.

Polling from Solar United Neighbors shows that West Virginians support expanding solar access through community solar and want to protect net metering. If the rally is any indication, that polling is correct.

The other event that sparked some joy kicked off the legislative session: On Jan. 9, West Virginia Rivers and other environmental organizations held an event to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the water crisis, when Freedom Industries spilled a toxic chemical into the Elk River and threatened the water of 300,000 West Virginians.

You'd think this would have been a solemn event. And yes, while it was a space for deep reflection, it was encouraging to be in the same room of so many people who care passionately about protecting our air, land and water for current and future generations.

Winter in West Virginia might be rough, but there are still bright spots to remind you that, against all odds, like-minded people are working together to bring positive change for the future.

Now residing in Charleston, West Virginia, Quenton King is originally from the state's Eastern Panhandle. He works in environmental policy. He is on the advisory board of Reimagine Appalachia.

This article was originally published by West Virginia Watch, westvirginiawatch.com

Candy Darters Caught in the Crossroads

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By Olivia Miller

been eradicated due to sedimentation and other human-caused impacts.

The Cherry River watershed, in particular, harbors a high percentage of forest cover and the absence of variegate darters, which fosters a high degree of connectivity among populations. The stream corridors and mixed conifer and red spruce forests in this area also provide summer roosting and foraging habitat for two endangered bats: the northern long-eared bat and the Indiana bat.

South Fork Coal Company holds permits for ten mining operations in the Cherry River watershed. One of these mines, the 1,000-plus-acre Rocky Run Surface Mine, can only be accessed via a haul road that crosses through the Monongahela National Forest. In 2021, the Forest Service issued a commercial road use permit to allow the private coal company to haul coal mined at Rocky Run Mine along Forest Service roads.

The road use permit granted by the Forest Service in 2021 allows South Fork Coal Company to haul oversized coal loads and conduct extensive road clearing and construction—including tree cutting, regrading and widening

the road, and removing and replacing culverts on FS 249, a gravel road on steep slopes above South Fork Cherry River and Laurel Creek. The permit also allows the company to haul mining supplies, equipment, personnel, and explosives on FS 223, a gravel road along a direct tributary to the North Fork Cherry River.

In March and April 2022, South Fork Coal Company was cited for violations leading to excess sedimentation during a time of year when candy darters are spawning in South Fork Cherry River. Inspections by the Forest Service found that the company was not properly maintaining the roadways and documented sedimentation escaping the roadway and crushed and blocked culverts in tributaries to South and North Fork Cherry Rivers.

The company was also cited in November 2023 for violations related to spreading raw coal on the roadway. Spreading coal ash on the road and coal dust spewing from coal trucks can result in toxic chemicals and heavy metals such as selenium and lead reaching the rivers and harming aquatic life.

In response to the demonstrated pattern of violations, on December

10, 2023 WVHC issued a ten day notice to the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement requesting that the problems be resolved. To date, no action has been taken by the Office to hold the coal company or federal agencies accountable for the increasing number of violations occurring in this sensitive ecosystem.

The suit brought by WVHC and our partners in January faults the Forest Service for failure to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure the candy darter would not be jeopardized and its critical habitat not destroyed or adversely modified—as mandated by the Endangered Species Act—before issuance of the road use permit.

The agency did not conduct an environmental analysis as required by the National Environmental Policy Act, which requires environmental review for any federal action that may have significant environmental effects.



A dead bulldozer sits atop land stripped by South Fork Coal Company.

As notices of violations against South Fork Coal Company continue to pile up and the candy darter is unjustly pushed to its limits, conservation groups are asking the court to vacate and set aside the permit issued by the Forest Service and direct the agency to complete consultation with the Fish and Wildlife Service and environmental reviews as required by law.

For more information, visit the Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance project website: <https://bit.ly/3MdE07N>

Become a Dolly Sods Wilderness Steward!

Sign up today at bit.ly/DollySodsWildernessStewards

Leave a legacy of hope for the future

Remember the Highlands Conservancy in your will. Plan now to provide a wild and wonderful future for your children and future generations. Bequests keep our organization strong and will allow your voice to continue to be heard.

Your thoughtful planning now will allow us to continue our work to protect wilderness, wildlife, clean air and water and our way of life.

Sacrifices at the Altar of King Coal

By Robert Beanblossom

West Virginians have always worshipped at the altar of King Coal. Even today when the industry contributes so little to the overall economy and when there are fewer coal miners than ever, out-of-state coal barons still dominate the agenda of the governor's office, our Legislature and the politics of the state.

Weak laws along with their even weaker enforcement, minimum bonding requirements, lax safety standards, huge tax breaks and low severance taxes have created a huge system of welfare to support the industry. I've long argued the Department of Environmental Protection could be abolished because it accomplishes so little, and no one would ever notice. Coal has always cost more than it gave, and the taxpayers of the state are forced to pay the difference.

Nowhere is this more evident than with strip mining, a scourge on the landscape that has been tolerated since shortly after World War II when it developed in a big way. A succession of mediocre governors turned a blind eye to the practice and have, in fact, been among its strongest enablers. The re-

sult has been hundreds of thousands of forested acres destroyed and the land defaced as though by a huge bomb.

For several years before I retired and left West Virginia, I was involved in an initiative to encourage coal companies to reestablish tree cover to strip mined land during the reclamation process, and I can take you to several locations today that support stands of young trees.

We clearly demonstrated that forests could be restored on striped land by avoiding soil compaction, selecting the right soil medium, and selecting the proper tree species to plant. Even though we met some success, nothing that I observed during this process convinced me to change my long-held belief that strip mining should have been abolished a long time ago.

While tree cover can clearly be re-established, strip mining greatly reduces what foresters refer to as site index. It is expressed in terms of the average height of sample trees at a specified base age since height growth is a good indication of the quality of the site; but the growth rates for trees planted on land after it has been stripped

mined are significantly reduced. To the trained eye it is obvious that land that has been stripped has a much lower site index than adjacent undisturbed forest land. Simply put, this acreage would never again be as productive as the surrounding forest if it had been left unmolested.

Another important factor to consider is the overall loss of forests to strip mining. West Virginia gained forest land from about 1940 through the early 1990s primarily through the conversion of abandoned farmland. More recent studies indicate that this trend is now reversed, and the state has lost about 250,000 or so acres of forest land in recent years primarily due to strip mining. It is disheartening to fly over southern West Virginia and see the denuded acreage. Only a small percentage of that strip mined land has ever been successfully restored to tree cover, and it will be a century or longer before it returns to full productivity.

Strip mining is a two-edged evil. When coal is burned, it emits vast quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and is one of the chief contributors of global warming. That, of course, is reason enough to abolish the practice; but as forests are destroyed in advance of mining, their ability to produce life-sustaining oxygen and absorb carbon dioxide is also lost.

One mature tree, for example, absorbs approximately 13 pounds of carbon dioxide each year. For every

ton of wood grown, approximately 1.47 tons of carbon dioxide is removed annually and is re-placed with about 1.07 tons of oxygen. One acre of healthy forest land produces enough oxygen for 18 individuals to live for a year.

The foregoing is but one example. All the many other benefits we derive from our forests are gone too — valuable wildlife habitat, watershed protection, recreation and others too numerous to list. The forests of West Virginia are too valuable for them to be destroyed for a few measly dollars.

I'm always reminded of something that former Congressman and Secretary of State Ken Hechler once told me, "If coal is so great, why isn't everyone moving to McDowell County?"

Strip mining and the coal industry will eventually die completely because the world, unlike backward little West Virginia, is rapidly moving away from fossil fuels. Coal will never return to its former glory (Hallelujah!) but why wait? Let's act now to do something that should have been done years ago and immediately abolish this insidious practice once and for all.

Robert Beanblossom, a native of Mingo County, retired after a 42-year career with the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources. He now resides in North Carolina and can be contacted at r.beanblossom1862@outlook.com.

West Virginia's Longest Hiking Trail Needs Volunteers

West Virginia Scenic Trails Association (WVSTA) held its Allegheny Trail interest meeting at Big Sandy Brews in early January. The Allegheny Trail is West Virginia's longest hiking trail.

At more than 300 miles it spans West Virginia from north to south. Along the way, the trail passes through four state parks and three national forests.

It's northern terminus is on

the Mason-Dixon Line at the Pennsylvania-West Virginia border near Bruceton Mills.

The Allegheny Trail winds its way south until it meets the Appalachian Trail on Peters Mountain at the Virginia-West Virginia border.

"Maintaining 311 miles is quite a feat," WVSTA Secretary Marissa Bennett said.

The WVSTA is looking for volunteers to help maintain the trail.

Volunteers would level the ground on the trail, cut brush, cut out fallen trees and blaze along trees to help mark the path.

"This is going to be our 50th year and still so many people aren't aware that West Virginia has a long distance hiking trail," Bennett said.

Outdoorsman Nick Lozano was instrumental to the founding of the trail. He thought that the natural beauty of the Allegheny Mountains ri-

valued that of the Great Smoky Mountains, and that there should be a trail similar to the Appalachian Trail that ran through West Virginia.

The WVSTA is a volunteer led non-profit organization that oversees multiple trails in West Virginia including the Allegheny, Mary Ingles and Great Eastern trails.

If you are interested in volunteering can go to hiketheallegheny-trail.org.

The Reclamation

(for Jeff)

1. **There will come a dawn
when, like trees in June,
the Appalachian people will reclaim
what can only so long be denied.**

**On that morn dew will soften the moon
and up from dark hollers they will rise,
moving with the persistence
of tendrils reaching towards light
and floating like burning fog
along rocky spines and inclines
to the tops of the mountains.**

They will not be thwarted.

2. **Like the ancient blizzards of childhood
they will cover the scars of greed
with a vision of crystalline purity.
Even the dinosaurs
and yellow caterpillars of the fossil age
will be buried beneath the muffling quiet
of their accumulation.**

All will rest. Life will be a slow melting.

**And after many springs and much rust
no one will remember
when the land was made slave
to red law and lust.**

— *Bob Henry Baber*

Volunteer Opportunities with WVHC

Are you passionate about environmental conservation and eager to contribute your skills and time towards positive change?

The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy invites you to be an active part of our mission by joining one of our committees. Each committee focuses on specific aspects of conservation, providing you with the opportunity to channel your enthusiasm into meaningful action.

Our committees focus on:

- Protection and responsible management of public lands
- Mitigating the impact of highways on wildlife habitats and communities
- Addressing the challenges posed by climate change and advocate for policies that promote resilience
- Driving the transition toward clean energy sources
- Monitoring and addressing the impacts of extractive industries in our state
- Championing the preservation and restoration of our waterways

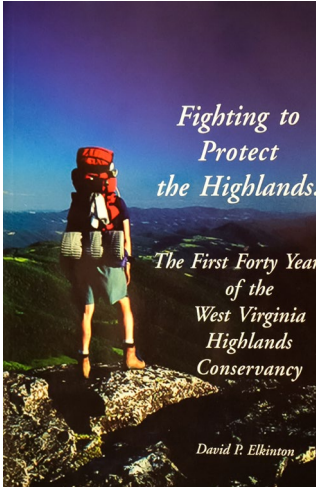
Ready to make a difference? Email info@wvhighlands.org

The Highlands Voice: It's Not Just for Reading Any More

The Highlands Voice is the main way that the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy communicates with its members. But we would like to communicate with more than our members. We have a valuable perspective and information; we would like to communicate with everybody. We still offer electronic delivery. If you would prefer to receive it electronically instead of the paper copy please contact Crys Bauer at membership@wvhighlands.org. With electronic delivery, you will receive a link to a pdf of the Voice several days before the paper copy would have arrived.

No matter how you receive it, please pass it along. If electronically, share the link. If paper, hand it off to a friend, leave it around the house, leave it around the workplace. It's not just for reading. It's for reading and passing along.

GET A GREAT HISTORY BOOK



For the first time, a comprehensive history of West Virginia's most influential activist environmental organization. Author Dave Elkinton, the Conservancy's third president, and a 20-year board member, not only traces the major issues that have occupied the Conservancy's energy, but profiles more than 20 of its volunteer leaders.

From the cover by photographer Jonathan Jessup to the 48-page index, this book will appeal both to Conservancy members and friends and to anyone interested in the story of how West Virginia's mountains have been protected against the forces of over-development, mismanagement by government, and even greed.

- 518 pages, 6x9, color cover, published by Pocahontas Press

To order your copy for \$15.95 plus \$3.00 shipping, visit the Conservancy's website, wvhighlands.org, where payment is accepted by credit card and PayPal. Proceeds support the Conservancy's ongoing environmental projects.

BECOME A MEMBER

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ Email _____

Membership categories (circle one)

	Individual	Family	Org.
Senior	\$15		
Student	\$15		
Introductory	\$15		
Other	\$15		
Regular	\$25	\$35	\$50
Associate	\$50	\$75	\$100
Sustaining	\$100	\$150	\$200
Patron	\$250	\$500	\$500
Mountaineer	\$500	\$750	\$1000

Mail to West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, P.O. Box 306, Charleston, WV 25321

West Virginia Highlands Conservancy
Working to Keep West Virginia Wild and Wonderful

You may also join online at www.wvhighlands.org

SUCH A DEAL!

Book Premium With Membership

Although "Fighting to Protect the Highlands, the First 40 Years of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy" normally sells for \$15.95 plus \$3.00 postage. We are offering it as a premium to new members. New members receive it free with membership. Existing members may have one for \$10.00. Anyone who adds \$10 to the membership dues listed on the How to Join membership or on the renewal form will receive the history book. Just note on the membership form that you wish to take advantage of this offer.

Board Highlights

By John McFerrin

The January 2024 Board meeting featured a new Board member, an expanded role for our Membership and Operations Secretary, and reports on what our various committees are doing.

The new Board member is Cindy Slater, the new representative of the Brooks Bird Club. Welcome aboard!

We also heard about the expanded duties and activities of Crys Bauer, our Membership and Operations Director. She had been working 20 hours per week, keeping track of our membership and fulfilling orders from our online store. Now, she will work 30 hours per week on such things as tabling at events while still keeping up her membership and order duties.

We looked back at our finances for 2023. Our expenses were greater than our revenue, although we had planned for that. The deficit was less than we had budgeted. We have enough savings to cover the deficit. We also approved a budget for 2024. It, too, anticipates a deficit. We are running deficits in the short run, mostly because we are investing more in staff. In the long term, we expect the investments will result in a larger organization that can support a larger budget.

Membership and Operations Director Crys Bauer presented a report on the membership, donations, and sales from our online store. Long-term trends are upward in all categories, although there are periodic fluctuations. She also discussed plans for event tabling and encouraged us to suggest stories for the West Virginia Public News Service.

Olivia Miller made her Program Director report. Along with Crys, she conducted a Giving Tues-

day campaign as well as a membership campaign. This resulted in several donations and new members. She and Crys have also spiffed up our tabling materials with a new banner, new tablecloths, and a one-page handout telling about us and what we do. She collected a summary of committee activities from all committee chairs and included the summaries in The Highlands Voice. She has been working to update the website, which now includes an option for getting involved. She thinks our website could use an update in the long run and has been exploring how much that would cost.

We are exploring becoming the publisher of a book—The Nature and Scenery of the West Virginia Highlands: A Motorist's Guide—by Jim Van Gundy, former West Virginia Highlands Conservancy Board member and longtime friend of the Highlands Conservancy. The first printing has sold out, and he would like to turn it over to the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy to publish a second printing. We would pay for another printing, take over the distribution, etc. The details of what would be involved are still unsettled. Several Board members had used the book and recommended it highly.

The Department of Highways is doing a new draft Environmental Impact Statement for Corridor H. Part of its charge is to include the northern alternative route that we have supported. The question always remains whether this will be a true consideration of that route or a token consideration, allowing the Department to say that it had studied that route but still liked what it had favored all along. The next big chore will be submitting comments on the draft Environmental Impact

Statement, a chore for which we will be prepared.

Susan Rosenblum presented the report of the Rivers Committee. It has made comments on the plan by the Department of Highways to do core drilling within the Monongahela National Forest in connection with consideration of potential routes for Corridor H. The committee is also gathering more information about the possible pumped storage facility on Cabin Run and considering what might be possible about the 24 new industrial chicken houses proposed for Tucker County. The citizen water monitoring program is going great.

The Dolly Sods Stewards are doing the same stuff and more. Trail maintenance and crosscut sawyer training will be in March and April. The Stewards hope to expand into backcountry areas and are planning to provide training for backcountry stewards. Fall solitude monitoring was completed by the end of October; there will be another round in May and June. In 2023, the Trailhead Stewards logged more hours at trailheads than ever before. They plan a training for new Stewards in May, along with a picnic.

Rick Webb reported on the activities of the Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance and announced new litigation over the Forest Service allowing use of a Forest Service Road as a coal haul road by South Fork Coal Company. See story on page one.

Luanne McGovern reported on matters legislative. The 2024 Legislative session is just starting. We, along with the West Virginia Environmental Council, decided upon our legislative priorities at the annual meeting of the West Virginia Environmental Council in Novem-

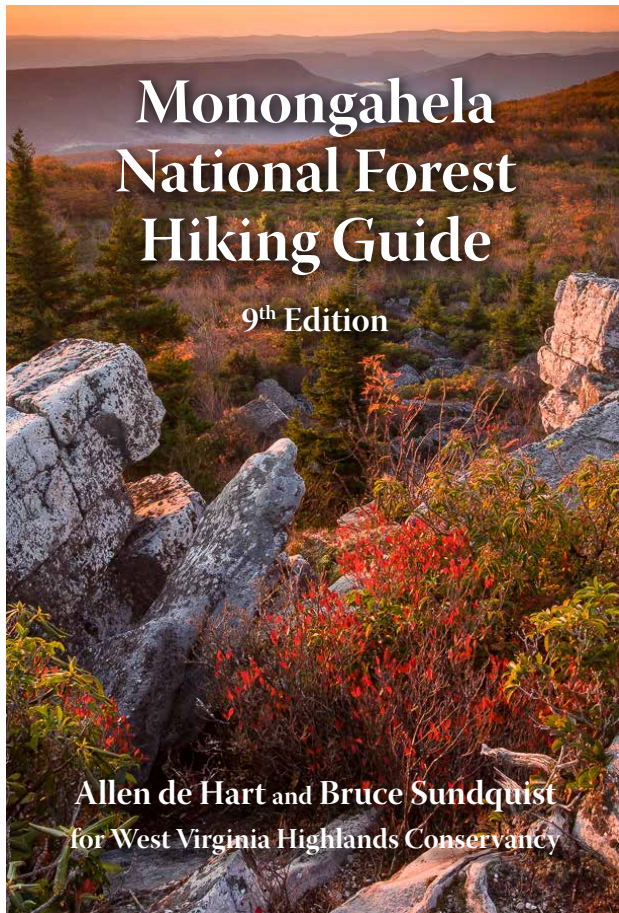
ber. They are:

- Preserving net metering for solar power producers
- Community solar
- Orphaned gas well responsibility – bonds to be set for plugging before drilling begins
- State of West Virginia Scenic Rivers designation
- Continuation of ORV restrictions on public lands
- Any changes to above ground storage tank rules
- Expansion of nuclear power
- New developments with the proposed hydrogen hub and carbon sequestration
- Working towards introducing a PFAS ban

Luanne also reported on the work of the Grants Committee. Three grants totaling over \$11,000 have been received. The grants are to help support a coloring book featuring highlands creatures and The Highlands Voice as well as provide support for the organization generally. There were some other potential grants for which our application was unsuccessful.

We are going to make comments to the Public Service Commission supporting the preservation of the present system of crediting homeowners who have solar power for the power they produce. See story on page five.

Hit the trails with our Mon National Forest Hiking Guide



Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, the new edition of the treasured guide to every trail in the Monongahela National Forest features brand-new topographic maps and Kent Mason's gorgeous photos, all in color.

The Guide has been updated with the cooperation of National Forest District Rangers and Recreation Specialists to reflect changes in the past ten years:

- newly designated wilderness areas
- new trails near campgrounds and sites of special significance
- a new complex of interconnected trails on Cheat Mountain
- rerouted and discontinued trails
- ratings for difficulty, scenery, access to water, and much else

The definitive guide to the Mon adds a wealth of information about history, wildlife, and botany; safety, preparation, and weather; horseback and mountain bike riding and cross-country skiing; as well as sources of further information on the Forest and its environs.

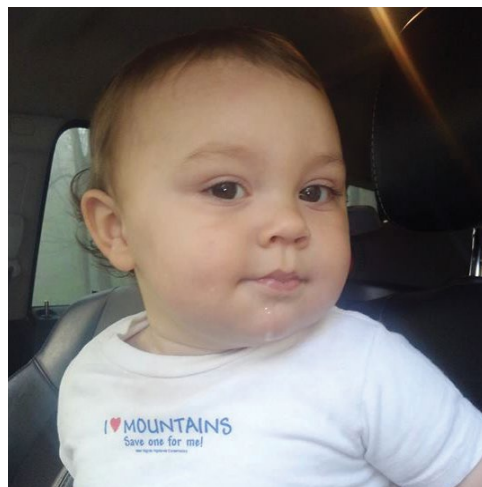
The Monongahela National Forest has long been known as a 'Special Place.' The hiking, backpacking, and cross-country skiing opportunities it provides are among the best in the eastern U.S. New wilderness and backcountry trails have been added to the outstanding areas we have appreciated for decades – Otter Creek Wilderness, Dolly Sods Wilderness, Flatrock Plains, Roaring Plains, Blackwater Canyon, Spruce Knob, North Fork Mountain, Shaver's Mountain, Laurel Fork Wilderness, Cranberry Wilderness -- and there are lesser-known gems to be found in between.

Profits from the sale of these guides support a wide variety of worthy environmental projects for the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy.

Send \$18.95 plus \$3.00 shipping to: West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, P.O. Box 306, Charleston, WV 25321 OR order from our website at www.wvhighlands.org

Get your I ❤️ MOUNTAINS and WVHC gear at our online store!

Show your love for the mountains with our range of bumper stickers, cotton tees, hats, onesies, toddler tees and Hydro Flasks. Shop now at wvhighlands.org



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