

West Virginia Highlands Conservancy
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The Highlands Voice

Since 1967, The Monthly Publication of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

Volume 58 No. 1 January 2026

Decades without clean water: How the Coalfield Clean Water Act aims to address southern West Virginia’s water crisis

By Jordan Howes, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

Residents in southern West Virginia’s coalfield counties have lived for decades without reliable access to clean drinking water. In communities across McDowell, Wyoming, Boone, Logan, Mingo, Lincoln, Mercer, Fayette and Raleigh counties, aging infrastructure, contamination and disinvestment have left many households relying on bottled water, roadside springs or unsafe tap water for daily use. This is an unacceptable reality for citizens living in the wealthiest nation in the world.

Reverend Caitlin Ware, co-director of From Below: Rising Together for Coalfield Justice, said the problem has persisted for generations, but only recently has begun



Water collected from Indian Creek in Wyoming County, WV. (Photo by WV Faith Collective)

receiving sustained attention.

“It’s existed for 25 to 50 years in some areas, but people just kind

of gave up,” Ware said. “They didn’t want to talk about it... they were like, it’s not going to change. We

just have to figure out how to adapt.”

From Below began as an immersion project intended to connect faith communities in northern West Virginia with residents in the southern coalfields, Ware said.

“Initially, we actually started as an immersion group,” she said. “We wanted to find ways that we could get people... particularly north of I-64, to just be aware of what’s happening in the coalfields and then come down, see what’s happening, talk with residents.”

The organization’s focus shifted in 2024 after Ware and her co-director, Rev. Brad Davis, began speaking with residents in Wyoming County about what they believed was a temporary water emergency.

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Decades without clean water: How the Coalfield Clean Water Act aims to address southern West Virginia's water crisis

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"They all start laughing," Ware said. "And they're like, 'We haven't had clean water in years.' And he's like, 'Oh—so this is a much bigger problem.'"

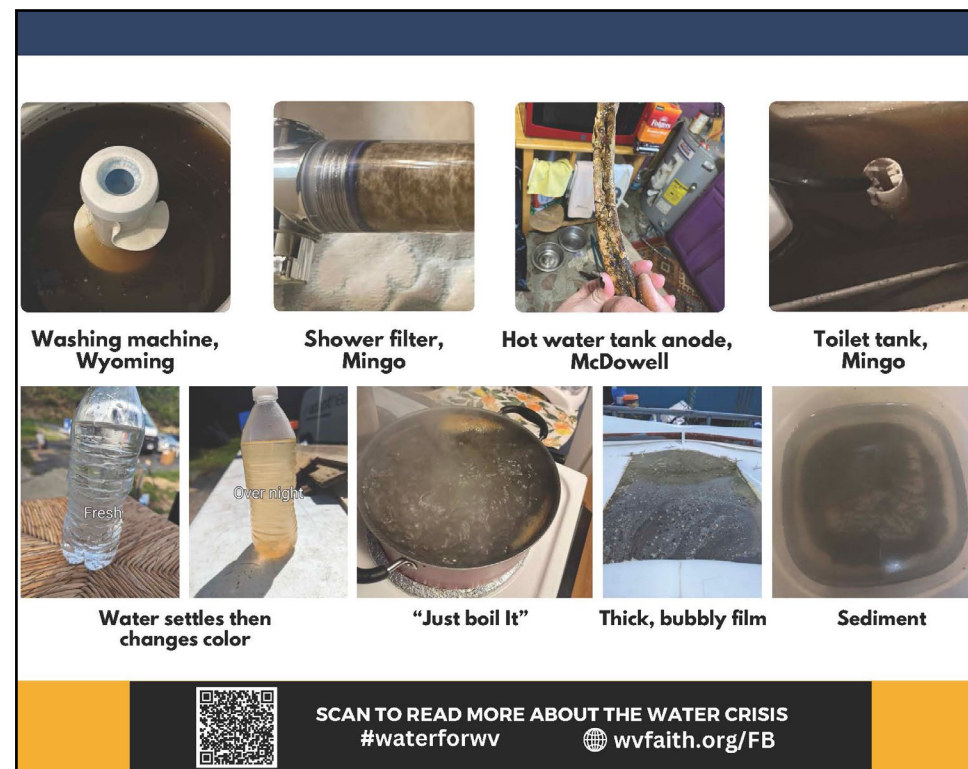
Further conversations revealed a pattern common across former coal towns, where water systems were built by mining companies in the early 20th century and later abandoned as the industry declined.

"Suddenly, your town has no industry," Ware said. "The people that were maintaining your water system are gone. And so, who's going to maintain the system and who's going to have the money to do it?"

As infrastructure aged and investment declined, residents in many communities were left with limited options. Ware said water in some areas runs black, orange, pink or yellow and may contain contaminants including lead, fecal matter, iron, manganese or methane.

In Wyoming County, she said methane contamination caused wells and, in some cases, homes to explode.

"Some people were told they



should not bathe in it," Ware said. "But what else are they going to do? It's not like you can bathe in the creeks."

In McDowell County, many residents collect water from roadside springs because it appears clearer than what comes from their taps.

"They take jugs and they collect water in jugs off the side of a road," Ware said. "Some people have to spend up to \$150 a month on bottled water."

Even when bottled water is used for drinking, residents often continue to bathe, wash clothes and clean with contaminated water, which Ware said damages plumbing and appliances.

"You're choosing the color of the clothes you buy based on how the water's going to stain it," she said. "I just watched somebody washing their bed sheets in Gary [West Virginia] water the other day and it just stained it brown."

State and federal data cited in

a support letter for the proposed Coalfield Clean Water Act describe the issue as a long-standing public health crisis. According to the letter, "Southern coalfield counties have been experiencing a public health crisis for decades due to our lack of access to safe drinking water." It also states that, "Public drinking water tested by the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection in McDowell County revealed high levels of fecal matter and lead."

The letter further notes that "Wyoming, Boone, and Mercer are the top three counties in America for most public water violations." Despite that, only a small portion of recent federal water funding has gone to the region. "Only 2.5% of \$432.4M in water and wastewater funds from the American Rescue Plan Act, 4 out of 161 projects, were awarded by the West Virginia Water Development Authority to southern coalfield communities.

Ware said funding decisions

have historically favored northern parts of the state.

"The state has only been sending money north," she said. "Even for the last two years... almost all of [the projects] are in the north."

The proposed Coalfield Clean Water Act would expand the circumstances under which the state can use money from its Revenue Shortfall Fund, also known as the Rainy Day Fund. Current law allows those funds to be used for infrastructure primarily in response to natural disasters.

"The Coalfield Clean Water Act amends state code to include public health crises as a permissible use of emergency infrastructure funds from the Revenue Shortfall Fund (Rainy Day Fund)," the support letter on behalf of From Below states.

Supporters say the change would allow lawmakers to appropriate \$250 million for water infrastructure projects in southern coalfield counties while maintaining the minimum fund balance required to protect the state's bond rating. According to the letter, "This allocation will fund the highest priority projects already approved and included in the fiscal year 2027 DEP Drinking Water Intended Use Plan." Funds would be distributed to public service districts and municipal water boards in nine counties.

Ware said many communities already have completed engineering plans but cannot proceed without sufficient funding.

"They know what needs done. They know the entire engineering plan," she said. "They can't move on it because of the funding."

Supporters of the bill argue that

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Corridor H in Wardensville moves forward despite unresolved environmental and safety concerns

By Jordan Howes, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

The long-planned highway expansion through the George Washington and Jefferson National Forest is once again moving forward, but without the level of environmental review, public input or scientific rigor that such a consequential project demands. Recent decisions by federal agencies regarding the Corridor H project between Wardensville, West Virginia, and the Virginia state line raise profound concerns about impacts to wildlife, public lands and cherished recreational resources.

Earlier this year, community groups and conservation organizations submitted detailed comments on the Supplemental Environmental Assessment (SEA) for Corridor H, urging federal agencies to require a Special Use Permit that would allow for meaningful public engagement. For months, agency records indicated that such a permit would be pursued. However, in November, the Federal Highway Administration issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and announced that the Forest Service would instead rely on a Letter of Consent, effectively shutting the public out of further review. In response, advocates from



Photo of Route 55 atop Great North Mountain. (Photo by Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance)

the Virginia Wilderness Committee, Stewards of the Potomac Highlands, the Highlands Conservancy, and others submitted a comprehensive technical letter documenting new information and unresolved impacts that were not adequately addressed in the SEA or the FONSI.

At the heart of these concerns is the failure to properly assess impacts to sensitive and imperiled wildlife. The proposed highway would cut through habitat known to support the wood turtle, a species considered endangered by international conservation authorities and identified as

a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in both West Virginia and Virginia. Despite extensive scientific literature documenting the wood turtle's vulnerability to habitat fragmentation, road mortality, and population isolation, federal analyses contain no meaningful evaluation of how this project would affect local populations. Without basic population data, movement studies, or mortality estimates, agencies have concluded, without evidence, that the highway would not threaten the species' viability in the forest. This is not informed decision-making; it

is speculation at the expense of biodiversity.

Similar concerns apply to the federally endangered northern long-eared bat. Surveys have confirmed the presence of an active maternity colony within the project area, yet the Forest Service's Biological Opinion concludes the project is "not likely to jeopardize" the species, even while acknowledging the permanent loss of hundreds of acres of roosting and foraging habitat and the likelihood that bats will be displaced, or killed—during construction. The assumption that bats will simply relocate and recover ignores the species' ongoing range-wide decline and the cumulative impacts of habitat loss and fragmentation.

The project also threatens one of the region's most important recreational resources: the Tuscarora Trail. This 250-mile long-distance trail, which connects to the Appalachian Trail and is part of the Great Eastern Trail network, crosses Route 55 at the crest of Great North Mountain. Thousands of volunteer hours have gone into maintaining this trail for hikers, equestrians, hunters and outdoor enthusiasts. Yet the SEA and FONSI largely dismiss long-stand-

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THE WAY THE VOICE WORKS

The Highlands Voice is the official publication of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy. While it is the official publication, every story in it does not represent an official position of the Conservancy. While all of our members share the general goal "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," our members often have differing views upon the best way to do that.

As a result, stories in The Voice often reflect different points of view. The Conservancy itself, however, only speaks through its Board. The only stories that reflect the official policies of the Conservancy are those reporting Board actions, including litigation positions we have taken, comments on proposed regulations, etc.

West Virginia Highlands Conservancy Online Store Catalog

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- WVHC 100% Cotton T-Shirts (Coyote Brown, Kelly Green, Navy Blue, Black) Available in XS-XXL: \$22.00
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- Fighting to Protect the Highlands: \$15.95 + \$5.38 shipping
- The Nature and Scenery of the West Virginia Highlands, 2nd Edition: \$29.95 + \$5.38 shipping

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

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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.



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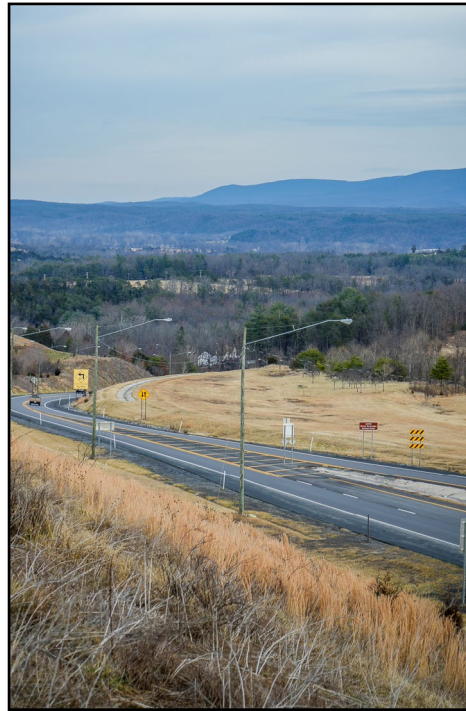
Corridor H in Wardensville moves forward despite unresolved environmental and safety concerns

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ing safety concerns at this crossing and fail to recognize the trail as a significant recreation site protected under federal transportation law. Increased traffic volume and higher speeds would make an already dangerous crossing even more hazardous, with no meaningful mitigation proposed.

Beyond these site-specific issues, the broader problem remains the same: agencies are relying on outdated analyses rooted in a 1996 Environmental Impact Statement that no longer reflects current conditions, science, or public values. Over the past three decades, our understanding of wildlife conservation, forest management, and transportation impacts has evolved dramatically. So too has the importance of protecting intact public lands as climate change and development continue to fragment the landscape.

The National Environmental Policy Act, the National Forest Management Act and the Endangered Species Act all exist to ensure that decisions affecting public lands and wildlife are grounded in science, transparency and accountability. When agencies bypass thorough



Corridor H route through Wardensville, WV. (Photo by Olivia Miller)

review and public involvement, they undermine not only environmental protections but public trust.

Although the FONSI has been issued, this process is far from over. The Forest Service is still determining the terms of its Letter of Consent, and continued advocacy is essential. Protecting wildlife, safeguarding public safety, and preserving the ecological and recreational integrity of our national forests are not optional considerations—they are legal obligations and moral responsibilities.

By placing this information into the administrative record, the technical letter that was submitted serves as both a warning and a roadmap: a warning about the irreversible harm that could result from uninformed decision-making and a roadmap for how agencies can still choose a more responsible path forward.

Decades without clean water: How the Coalfield Clean Water Act aims to address southern West Virginia's water crisis

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clean water infrastructure is essential to economic development. The letter states, “Without adequate water and wastewater infrastructure, drawing new industry to our region simply cannot and will not happen.”

Ware said arguments against investing in small or rural communities have contributed to population decline.

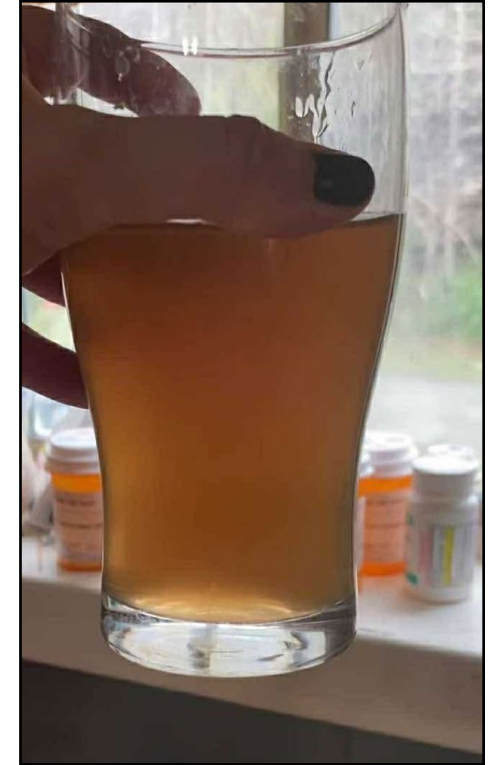
“That’s why these communities keep getting bypassed,” she said. “And that’s why these communities keep shrinking.”

The bill has bipartisan sponsorship, including Del. David Green, R-McDowell, and Del. Anitra Hamilton, D-Monongalia, who is originally from McDowell County. Ware said the legislation should be viewed as an investment rather than an expense.

“This is an economic development bill,” she said. “There are no jobs with no water.”

Despite the lengthy timeline for infrastructure projects, Ware said momentum is building.

“There’s not really a choice,” she said. “People are fed up. People want to see change, so we are work-



Tap water collected in McDowell County, WV. (Photo provided by WV Faith Collective)

ing with that momentum as much as we can.”

Even if passed, the legislation would take years to fully address the crisis. Ware said the proposal represents a first step toward accountability.

“It’s our time, it’s our turn,” she said. “It [the Coalfield Clean Water Act] is a good faith effort to say that the state cares to do something.”

Those interested in following the Coalfield Clean Water Act during the 2026 legislative session can track bill activity through the West Virginia Legislature’s official website or contact their representatives using this link. Updates and information about the water crisis in the southern coalfields are also shared by From Below: Rising Together for Coalfield Justice through its Facebook page and mailing list.

Solar power at the Legislature? Probably not much

By John McFerrin, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

There are a couple of issues concerning solar power that may arise during the 2026 legislative session: net metering and community solar. One—net metering—will likely not come up. The other—community solar—will likely arise but based upon its fate in the past, may not make much progress.

Net Metering

Although there are solar systems completely off the electrical grid, most systems remain connected to the grid and use net metering. The customers have a bi-directional meter which measures electricity flowing both ways. At night and during the bleak mid-winter, when homes use more electricity than their solar panels can produce, they buy electricity from the power grid just as everybody else does. During sunny days, when homes produce more electricity than they use, they sell the excess to the power company. Customers are only charged should their use be more than what their system produced. This entire process is called net metering.

Back in the old days—when so few people had solar power that nobody really cared—the Public Service Commission adopted a rule that said that the price of electricity would be the same no matter which way it was going. For every kilowatt the consumer sold the power company, it could buy a kilowatt at the same price.

Two years ago, when solar power had started to take off, First Energy proposed that it be allowed to charge customers the full retail



Photo of attendees at a Save Our Solar rally in 2023 at the WV State Capitol Building.

price for what the consumers used. For what the company bought from customers, it would pay a dramatically lower wholesale price.

Last year, Appalachian Power made a similar proposal to the Public Service Commission.

Both proposals resulted in negotiated settlements. Both utilities pay less for electricity the customer produces than the full retail price, but more than they had proposed to the Public Service Commission.

The Legislature will probably decide to leave well enough alone. Unless some business, person, or group steps forward to make this a legislative issue, it will probably assume the Public Service Commission will take care of it, and it does not have to.

If the Legislature gets involved, all bets are off. It could pass a statute requiring that electricity sold by

the customer have the same price as electricity bought by the customer. It could adopt some other rate.

Community Solar

Community solar allows entities with big roofs—a business, a parking garage, a church, a medical center—to install solar panels on those roofs and then sell the power that it does not use. For example, a business with a big roof and no shade trees anywhere nearby could cover that roof with solar panels. With such a big roof, it would produce more electricity than is needed. It could then sell the right to use the excess.

Community solar would not be restricted to existing roofs. It could be constructed as a free-standing entity. People could buy shares in the electricity produced by a free-standing community solar operation just as they would in one installed on an

existing rooftop. If West Virginia allowed community solar, freestanding community solar operations would probably be more common than those on big roofs.

As a practical matter, any community solar operation could not sell electricity to consumers directly. In addition to the legal barriers, there would be the practical problem of having to string wires, etc., to deliver the electricity. Instead, the excess electricity produced would go back into the electrical grid. Consumers would buy shares of the excess electricity produced by the business, the church, etc. They would then be credited on their electric bills in proportion to the shares they owned in the community solar operation.

This opens the possibility for all manner of people to have solar power who cannot have it now. Even though renters do not own their roofs where they could install their own solar panels, they could buy shares of the electricity produced from some big building or freestanding entity. Those who lived in shady spots where solar panels are not possible could buy shares. Those who could not afford the up-front investment in solar panels could buy shares.

It also opens the possibility of savings for consumers. Estimates are that consumers could save about ten percent on their electric bills by enrolling in community solar.

Even if this sounds like a good idea, it cannot happen in West Virginia under existing law. In West Virginia, electricity is sold by regulated monopolies (Appalachian

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Solar power at the Legislature? Probably not much

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Power and First Energy). They are regulated by the Public Service Commission, which sets rates and controls most aspects of their operations. As regulated monopolies, they control the poles, wires, etc. that a community solar operation would need to distribute electricity to its members.

This is where the Legislature comes in. Before community solar can become a reality in West Virginia, the Legislature would have to change the law. It would have to authorize community solar and require the Public Service Commission to adopt rules setting out how the monopolies it regulates (Appalachian Power and First Energy) would have to cooperate with community solar operations.

Bills to authorize community solar were introduced during the 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025 sessions of the West Virginia Legislature. They did not pass. There will almost certainly be a similar bill introduced in 2026.

Community solar might meet the same fate in 2026. The dissatisfaction with rising utility bills might give it a boost, although the West Virginia Legislature's automatic reflex that what is good for coal is good for West Virginia might kick in to defeat it.

Proposed Clean Water Act changes could strip protections from 80% of wetlands, 5 million stream miles

By Jordan Howes, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

Clean water protections in the United States are facing one of the most serious threats in decades. In recent months, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers proposed a rule that would revise the definition of "Waters of the United States" under the Clean Water Act, dramatically weakening federal safeguards for streams, wetlands, and other vital waterways. In response, organizations across the country mobilized quickly, submitting a coalition letter and thousands of public comments warning that the proposal would have devastating consequences for communities, wildlife, and public health.

The proposed rule follows the Supreme Court's decision in *Sackett v. EPA*, which already significantly narrowed the scope of waters protected under the Clean Water Act. That ruling stripped federal protections from approximately two-thirds of the nation's wetlands and up to five million miles of streams. Rather than limiting its actions to what the court required, the new proposal

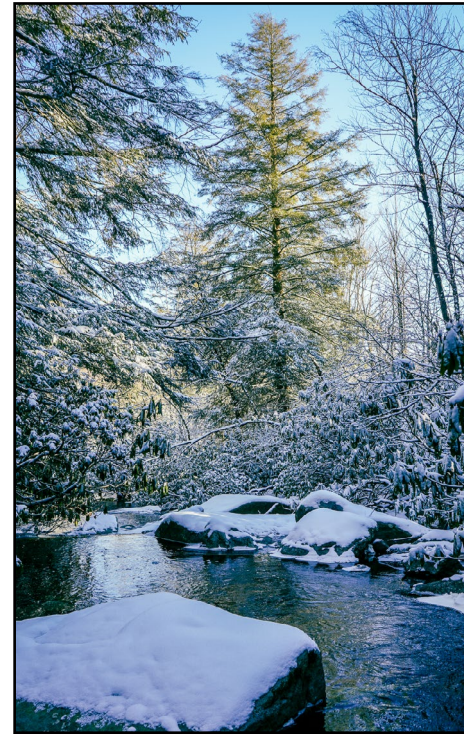


Photo of wintery conditions on Big Run of the Blackwater River. (Photo by Olivia Miller)

goes much further, using arbitrary and confusing criteria to exclude even more waters from protection. If finalized, the rule is expected to result in more than 80 percent of wetlands and millions of additional miles of streams losing federal Clean Water Act safeguards.

These rollbacks would have far-reaching impacts. Wetlands and streams are not isolated or expendable features of the landscape; they are essential components of the water systems that sustain our communities. Wetlands filter pollutants before water reaches our taps, store and slow floodwaters, recharge groundwater, and provide irreplaceable habitat for fish and wildlife. Streams that do not flow year-round contribute more than half of the flow to many of the nation's most important rivers and supply drinking water for at least 117 million people. Weakening protections for these

waters would increase pollution, threaten drinking water sources, and elevate flood risks in communities across the country.

The Clean Water Act has long served as a science-based foundation for protecting public health and the environment. For more than 50 years, it has helped curb industrial pollution, safeguard drinking water, and ensure that rivers, lakes, and streams remain viable for recreation, agriculture, and economic activity. Public support for these protections remains overwhelming, with polling consistently showing that up to 94 percent of voters across political parties support strong clean water safeguards. Despite this clear mandate, the proposed rule disregards both the scientific understanding of how water systems function and the public's desire for meaningful protections.

Although the public comment period on this proposal has now closed, the fight to defend clean water is far from over. The EPA and the Army Corps are reviewing comments and determining next steps, and continued advocacy will be critical to holding decision-makers accountable to the intent of the Clean Water Act. Protecting clean water is not optional—it is fundamental to healthy communities, resilient ecosystems, and a functioning economy. As this process moves forward, we remain committed to opposing harmful rollbacks and advancing strong, science-based protections for the waters that people and wildlife depend on, now and for generations to come.

Join WVHC for Green Drinks in Morgantown!

By Olivia Miller, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy is excited to host Green Drinks in Morgantown at Apothecary Ale House every second Wednesday of the month from 5 to 7 p.m., and we'd love to see our members and friends from the area there. Green Drinks is a relaxed, welcoming monthly gathering for people who care about the environment, enjoy good conversation, and want to connect with others working to make West Virginia a better place.

Originally started as informal meetups for environmental professionals and advocates, Green Drinks has grown into something much broader: a space for neighbors, students, organizers, and curious community members to come together.



Folks with their WVHC stickers at a recent Green Drinks gathering. (Photo by Christa Clasgens)

With support from West Virginians for Public Lands and the Sierra Club, each month we share updates on a timely environmental topic or local initiative—alongside plenty of time to socialize. Past conversations have covered the Roadless Rule, efforts to designate 16 waterways in the Monongahela National Forest as Wild and Scenic Rivers, data center proposals across the state and actions people can take, and helpful resources to stay engaged with the legislative session—all in a relaxed, friendly setting.

If you love West Virginia's public lands, care about your community, or just want to make some noise and a few new friends along the way, Green Drinks is for you. It's informal, low-pressure, and always a good time. For questions, email info@wvhighlands.org, and keep an eye on our Facebook page for upcoming dates and topics. We hope you'll join us next month on Feb. 11.

Hit the trails with our Monongahela National Forest Hiking Guide

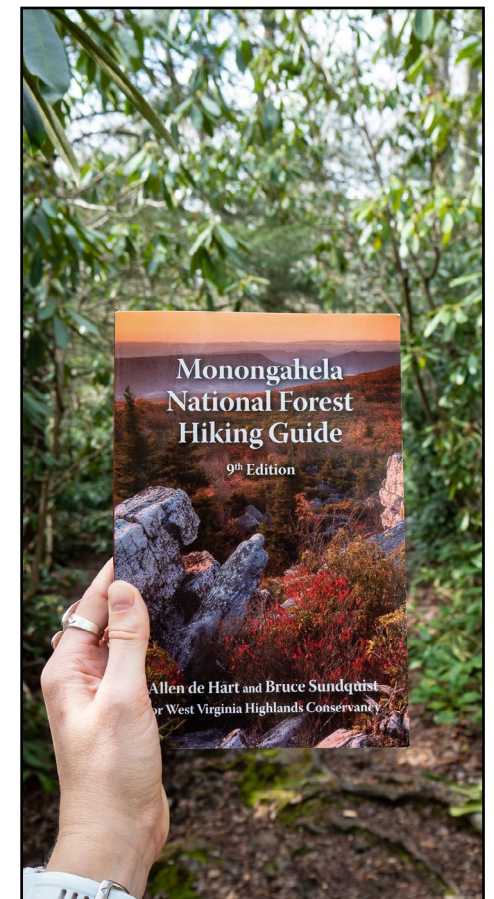
Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, the new edition of the treasured guide to every trail in the Monongahela National Forest features brand-new topographic maps and Kent Mason's gorgeous photos, all in color.

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.

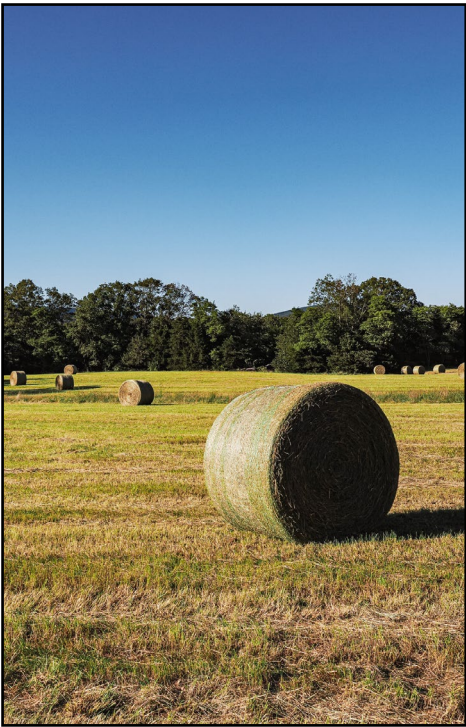
Send \$21.95 plus \$5.38 shipping to: West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, P.O. Box 306, Charleston, WV 25321 OR order from our website at www.wvhighlands.org.

Attempts to undermine conservation easements may return in the 2026 legislative session

By Jocelyn Phares, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

A topic we may indirectly see revisited during the 2026 West Virginia legislative session is the regulation of conservation easements.

Conservation easements are voluntary agreements used by land trusts and other preservation organizations to achieve land protection goals. These agreements allow a landowner to retain the full title of the property, while restricting certain uses to protect the land’s natural



resource values. Conservation easements are typically done ‘in perpetuity’, or without an end date, to protect the land for as long as possible. However, during the 2025 West Virginia legislative session, proposed

HB3294 sought to restrict any agreement which limits the use of natural resources to a term of 20 years.

The purpose of conservation easements is to protect the land for the landowner for as long as they see fit.

Limiting conservation easements to terms of a definite length is an infringement on the landowner’s ability to do as they want with their own property.

As we enter the 2026 legislative session, the effects of the ‘bill that never was’, HB324, are still being felt across the state. In particular, as the state catches the eye of new industries like data centers, limiting conservation easements may appeal to some.

It is important to remember why conservation easements exist, how they serve landowners and most importantly, how they serve West Virginia.

Make your voice heard!

We’ve added a page to our website where you can find contact details for state and federal representatives at wvhighlands.org/contact-your-representatives. The West Virginia Legislative session will begin on Jan. 14, 2026.

If you’re ready to advocate for the environment, this resource makes it simple to get involved!

BECOME A WVHC MEMBER

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City _____ State _____ Zip _____

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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

West Virginia's native non-game fishes steal the show at the 2025 Fall Review

By Cameron Layne, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

At the Conservancy's annual Fall Review, I was invited to give a presentation about the unique beauty of West Virginia's fish diversity. More importantly, I was able to bring focus to the special yet often overlooked non-game fishes, which comprise the majority of our state's nearly 200 fish species.

The purpose of my presentation was to help alleviate the group terms "Shiners" or "Minnows" that actually represent diverse and important species that inhabit our fragile waters. Especially with a history of logging, coal mining, and land alterations in West Virginia, I wanted to emphasize that such fish species are often reliable bioindicators (signs) of ecological health.



Cameron Layne presenting his panel titled "Candy, Diamonds, Rainbows, and More: A Look into West Virginia's Stream Fishes." (Photo by Chirsta Clasgens)

Not only this, but these fish help represent cultural identity, water quality, and a name for our beloved state.

It was nothing short of inspiring to see the eyes of everyone in the room light up with excitement at images and tales of Candy Darters, Brook Trout, New River endemic species, and much more. With some species that can only be found in West Virginia, such as the Diamond Darter, I felt a personal urgency to share with others the worth of preserving our state's rich and dense fish communities.

To see everyone so excited for my presentation fulfilled my passion for aquatic conservation of Appalachian fishes and elevated the reason I became a fisheries biologist. I knew I had achieved my goal when I heard from attendees afterwards say, "I had no idea we had beautiful fish like that!"

For more information on West Virginia's fishes, visit the West Virginia Native Fish Coalition website (<https://nativefishcoalition.org/west-virginia>) or the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources website (<https://wvdnr.gov/fishing/>).

Send Us a Post Card, Drop Us a Line, Stating Point of View

Please email any poems, letters, commentaries, events, etc. to the Voice editor at jordan.howes@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.

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Your thoughtful planning now will allow us to continue our work to protect wilderness, wildlife, clean air and water and our way of life in the mountains. Contact christa.clasgens@wvhighlands.org

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 and volunteer opportunities in West Virginia.



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2026 Legislative priorities: A close look at data centers, HB2014 and the conservation of public and private lands

By Luanne McGovern, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

The West Virginia Legislative session will kick off on Jan. 14, 2026, and as usual, the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy will be actively engaged in advocating for certain high-priority issues during the 60-day session. We have partnered for many years with the West Virginia Environmental Council (WVEC) which employs two full-time lobbyists during the session, working on issues important to all of us.

Data Centers and HB2014

During last year's session, one of the most egregious bills passed was HB2014 – called the “Power Generation and Consumption Act,” or more commonly the microgrid and data center bill. This legislation strips all power away from local governments to control the location and size of microgrid power plants and data centers in their communities. In addition, the majority of the property tax revenues from the facilities will be diverted back to the state and away from local communities.

Massive power plants and data center projects have been announced in Tucker, Mingo and Mason counties, and HB2014 has made local communities powerless to oppose or control their implementation. We will be advocating



Snowy scene at the West Virginia Capitol Building in Charleston, WV. (Photo by Olivia Miller)

for the revision of HB2014 to put in place common-sense guidelines that will protect local communities from these massive projects:

- Repeal restrictions on local zoning and control
- Encourage location on brownfield sites
- Authorize local referenda on the projects
- Incentivize renewable energy microgrids

Conservation of Public and Private Lands

Each year, we must play “defense” on multiple bills that are introduced to remove protections from our precious public lands. This year is unlikely to be any different. We will be closely monitoring bills as they are introduced to prevent further deterioration of the

public lands of West Virginia.

- Keep public lands free of Off-Road Vehicles and keep trails non-motorized
- Keep public lands free of timbering, undefined “economic development” projects, and other incompatible uses
- Ensure the property rights of private landowners to enter conservation easements
- Prevent efforts to restrict forest carbon sequestration.

In addition, we will be working to support the following efforts:

- Support updates and corrections to the West Virginia Rail Trails Program to address railroad liability and safety risk concerns
- Support the Public Waterways Access Act, which would provide public river access at bridge crossings

We will be keeping our membership updated on a regular basis through social media, emails, The Highlands Voice and with targeted action alerts. Your help is always needed and always appreciated – stay tuned!

Help protect
our community,
land, and future
– donate to our
Data Center
fund.



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.



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