

West Virginia Highlands Conservancy
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The Highlands Voice

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1,980 acres saved in emergency land campaign next to the New River Gorge

By Arc of Appalachia Staff

In late May of 2026, some of the best remaining wildlands in the heartland of Appalachia were announced for sale by a prestigious auction house. On the auction block were 2,770 acres split into eight parcels, each one of them touching New River Gorge National Park, as well as another nine parcels of land for sale further south of the park — over 6,000 acres in all! When the news went live, the auction, scheduled for June 30, was only six weeks away.

Thanks to counsel from Ashton Berdine, West Virginia Director of The Conservation Fund, the non-profit land trust, the Arc of Appalachia — headquartered in Ohio but committed to wildlands preservation in Ohio, WV, and KY — was already



Piney Creek Gorge (Photo provided by Arc of Appalachia).

aware of the national significance of the region. The auction parcels’ most predominant feature was Piney

Creek, a spectacular 1,000-foot deep gorge sculpted by roaring, fast-moving waters. Fortuitously, two of the

eight parcels for sale lay on the west bank of Piney Creek on its last four-mile run, before it reaches its confluence with the New River inside the National Park.

Ashton had also previously introduced Arc representatives to the City of Beckley’s recreation and tourism leaders. Arc staff already knew that Beckley’s master recreation and tourism plan called to connect the city directly to the National Park. Since 2011, Beckley’s leadership dreamed of a 12-mile hiking and mountain bike trail that would one day connect Beckley with the National Park’s boundary. This goal was core to the city’s future plans to be an even more important visitor gateway to New River Gorge Na-

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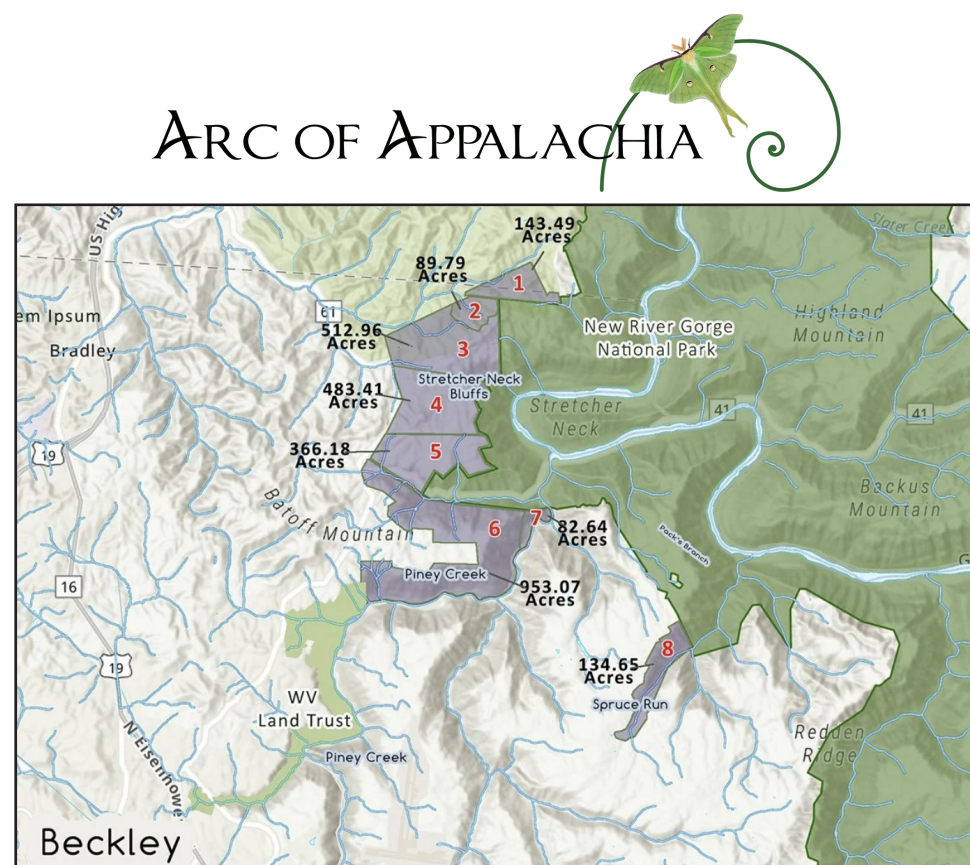
1,980 acres saved in emergency land campaign next to the New River Gorge

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tional Park.

This trail was no pipedream. West Virginia Land Trust already owned land along the Piney Creek nearly two-thirds of the way from Beckley to the National Park, and a trail was already installed nearly the entire distance. If the remaining four-mile gap could be purchased at auction, Beckley's 15-year old dream would come true.

It was also Ashton who informed the Arc of Appalachia's leadership of the impending auction. Immediately comprehending what was at stake, they launched into action. Arc Director, Nancy Stranahan, confessed, "We knew we wanted to buy the Piney Creek parcels, six and seven, for sure, but we figured it wouldn't hurt to at least try to raise money for the others. For one thing, telling the public we liked all of the parcels might confuse the competing bidder. And who knows, maybe we'll raise more money than we think!" So Stranahan set an undisclosed \$3.7 million goal, and the Arc staff members threw everything they had into building the campaign components of web pages, photo galleries, and short video reels. When the campaign finally went public on June 6, auction day was only 24 days away. Stranahan mused that if they raised even half of their goal,



Map highlighting the 1,980 acres acquired in June 2026, protecting key forests, streams and ridgelines adjacent to New River Gorge National Park. (Map provided by Arc of Appalachia)

she would have assessed the campaign as a great success.

When auction day arrived, the Arc of Appalachia's staff and board were in a state of shock. They had raised \$3.2 million in pledges!! The Arc hoped it would be enough money to not only buy the Piney Creek parcels six and seven, but also possibly parcels four and five, which featured wetlands and panoramic bluffs overlooking the New River, and maybe even parcel eight, which took in Spruce Run, a gorgeous rocky tributary of Mill Creek that also drained into the New but through a different watershed.

Auction day at Beckley's Tamarrack Inn turned out to be a tense, three-hour endurance marathon with 120 registered bidders, some of them bidding online, and others, like the Arc, bidding in person. The

first round permitted bidding only on individual parcels. The second round allowed bidding in groups. Figuring out what combinations of bids would land on the leaderboard was so complicated that the auction company had designed a complex computer app to calculate it!

For nearly three hours, the Arc watched the proceedings unfold with dismay. Two hours in, they were certain they were destined to go home empty-handed. During all that time, they only landed on the leaderboard two times, only to be knocked off within seconds. And then, in the last fifteen minutes of the auction, the Arc threw its entire weight on the combination of five parcels, four through eight. As the clock ticked down, they watched breathlessly and incredulously as they stayed on the board. Won were five parcels, to-

taling 1,980 acres.

The campaign partnership ended up inspiring 722 donors, representing 41 states in the Union. As the campaign unfolded, a collaborative association formed with partners that included the West Virginia Land Trust, Green Forests Work, Beckley Area Foundation, and Piney Creek Watershed Association. Other regional organizations offered their encouragement and support, including New River Gorge National Park and Preserve, New River Conservancy, Beckley Outdoors, Beckley Area Trails, Beckley-Raleigh Counties Chamber of Commerce Foundation, New River Alliance of Climbers Association, and Southern West Virginia Trout Unlimited.

Why was this such a monumental victory? Because, in this effort, the people of West Virginia didn't have to do it alone. Conservation-minded people all over the nation not only recognized the national significance of the West Virginia parcels, but they opened their wallets and put their values into action, securing a win at the auction. According to Stranahan, "It's past time that the nation realizes that West Virginia has some of the densest forests left in the nation, and harbors some of our country's greatest natural treasures on private lands. If we can succeed with a campaign like this one, then it stands to reason that we can do it again. And again. Now that's a statement of hope."

To learn more about this campaign, visit the web at Arc of Appalachia New River Wilderness. To learn more about the Arc of Appalachia, visit their home page. Arc staff welcomes communication of all kinds, and you can reach them at info@arcofappalachia.org.

Corridor H: More miles opened, more reasons for concern

By Hugh Rogers and Barbara Weaner, Go North Alliance

On June 22, the Governor, with federal, state, and local officials, highway workers, contractors, consultants, and citizens including a sign-carrying Go North delegation, opened a section of Corridor H between Kerens in Randolph County and Rt. 72 north of Parsons in Tucker County. Eleven years of construction had extended the highway eleven miles.

From the west, 51 miles of the four-lane are now open from I-79 at Weston to Parsons. Construction is ongoing on 3.5 miles east of Rt. 72, crossing the Cheat River bridge to US 219 as it climbs Backbone Mountain. From the east, 66 miles are open from Wardensville to Davis. Parsons to Davis, as it's called, remains the missing piece. (A shorter outlier from Wardensville to the Virginia border is scheduled for completion before Parsons to Davis begins.)

Other reasons besides its difficulty can help explain why the 10-mile stretch from Parsons to Davis was saved for last. Most important was ease of access for visitors from the east to Tucker County's four-season attractions, which offered a



Corridor H section from Kerens to Parsons under construction in 2023. The route has since opened to the public as of June 22, 2026. (Photo by Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance)

more likely payoff than any other “economic development.” Thus, once the corridor reached Elkins, the focus jumped to that side. Now it has returned.

Nevertheless, it is true that the Tucker County connection has been regarded as the most problematic of the entire corridor.

If the just-opened section was a rehearsal, we are worried. Numer-

ous issues plagued and lengthened its years of construction. Most visible has been the bridge over 219 at Moore. The site had to be completely reconstructed after discovery that its piers had slipped. As far as we know, the state and the contractor are still litigating each party's responsibility.

For insights into the problems that travelers don't see, we asked

Barbara Weaner, who with her husband Scott has lived on a farm on South Haddix Run for fifty years. Here's Barbara's report:

The watershed upstream of us is entirely in the Monongahela National Forest. South Haddix was a breeding native brook trout stream prior to the highway construction. Massive clearcuts and obliteration of many ephemeral streams caused dramatic changes in sedimentation, which not only killed the trout but increased flooding.

The worst flooding in the last 50 years occurred on South Haddix Run on May 26, 2024, shortly after the highway was paved. Water ran off the surface and shot out of culverts down steep hollows degraded by construction fill, discarded timber and rubble. Huge volumes barreled through our hollow, carrying large trees onto our pastures. Our farm fences were torn down.

The stream broke out of its banks, across our fields, into our pond, which then broke out of its banks, flooding the roadway across the hollow. Not even the flood of 1985 did anything like this.

High water events have continued. The most recent was on May

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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

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

Please include \$6.25 shipping for Apparel items

Drinkware

- WVHC Hydro Flask 20 oz. All Around Tumbler (Birch, Indigo, Black): \$35.00 + \$5.50 shipping
- WVHC Hydro Flask 21 oz. Standard Mouth Flex Cap Water Bottle (Pacific, Mesa, Indigo): \$45.00 + \$5.50 shipping

Stickers

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

Books

- Monongahela National Forest Hiking Guide, 9th Edition: \$21.95 + \$5.38 shipping
- 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

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.



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Corridor H: More miles opened, more reasons for concern

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27, when more than three feet of water covered 219 at the new exit ramp at Moore. 219 was closed for many hours. Poorly designed drainage ditches and inadequate culverts were overwhelmed by heavy rain.

That new intersection is confusing and dangerous in other ways. The ramp exits into a tight curve on an abrupt hump. It's a blind spot coming from either direction on 219. We're lucky the flood happened during daylight — if it had been dark, fatalities would have been likely.

We have maintained good relationships with the highway department, the Department of Environmental Protection and the West Virginia Rivers Coalition, reporting problems with stream turbidity and flooding. During the last five years, there have been dozens of violations and fines.

But the Governor and other officials celebrated the grand opening of the Kerens to Parsons section while these problems remained uncorrected.

The next section of the road from partway up the mountain to Davis will encounter steeper terrain and less room for error. Will our state's highway department, the Federal Highway Administration and the DEP learn from the mistakes made on earlier sections? Will a better route be instituted?

Good questions.

Off the beaten path: All about ants

By Cindy Berdine, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

Do you ever wonder what happens to ants when it rains? What do we really know about ants, anyway?

Recently, while camping, the campsite was invaded by ants. Little, teeny-tiny ones, and they were everywhere! Then it poured down rain. I am talking about torrential rain. Then I started thinking: Do they get flooded? Where do they go? Do they drown? So here we are. Turns out, ants are pretty cool creatures. Spoiler alert: They do not die or drown when it rains, either.

Ants are insects, and they belong to the family Formicidae within the order Hymenoptera, which also includes bees, wasps, and sawflies. They are found on all continents except Antarctica. The study of ants is called myrmecology, which is a specialized branch of entomology.

During rain, ants breathe through small openings called spiracles and can close them and hold their breath for up to 24 hours. Ant nests are deep and have drainage systems. They have waterproof exoskeletons and survive by closing their respiratory openings. Their colonies are designed with special drainage tunnels. Ants are sensitive to environmental changes such as humidity, temperature and air pressure. When these environmental changes take place, ants will move the brood and queen to higher ground before a storm. They may



even move them into your home. Ants create water traps, which are rooms designed to collect excess water, so the nest remains dry. Some species even create ant rafts, literally linking their bodies together to form a float. They can survive for weeks this way until they reach dry land.

The deepest ant hill known was made by leaf-cutter ants and reaches a depth of 26 feet.

The most common types of ants found in West Virginia are pavement ants (*Tetramorium immigrans*), carpenter ants (*Camponotus pennsylvanicus*) and odorous house ants (*Tapinoma sessile*).

Odorous house ants smell like rotting coconuts when crushed. When an ant dies from being crushed or squished, it sends out alarm pheromones, sending distress signals to the rest of the colony.

This chemical acts as a beacon and calls in the colony's own SWAT team to investigate the danger and retrieve the dead ant.

Before your reaction is to destroy an ant, remember that they play a vital role in our ecosystem. They contribute to soil health. They* control pest populations, including aphids, caterpillars and termites. They aerate and enrich the soil, excavate the ground, break up compacted earth and facilitate the movement of nutrients and water to plant roots.

They promote decomposition by removing dead insects and decomposing plant and animal matter from the environment. They encourage plant growth and serve as valuable biological indicators of climate change.

Board highlights: May 2026

By West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

At its May meeting, the Board heard updates on the Conservancy's programs, campaigns, membership, outreach and upcoming events.

President Marilyn Shoenfeld reported that Olivia Miller's transition into the executive director position is moving forward. The Board also discussed the growing workload facing the organization and the need to continue expanding fundraising and organizational capacity.

Membership and Outreach Director Christa Clagens reported that membership, contributions and store sales remain strong. She is working on membership renewals, outreach events, new merchandise, and possible partnerships with local businesses. Recent screenings of the film about longtime wilderness advocate Helen McGinnis have also been well received.

Interim Executive Director Olivia Miller reported on the Conservancy's work with partner organizations, grant applications, public outreach and campaigns involving data centers, Corridor H, public lands, and extractive industries.

Luanne McGovern reported on the rapid expansion of data center proposals across West Virginia. The Board discussed how the Conservancy should respond as these projects spread beyond Tucker County and create broader concerns about power generation, pollution, land use and community impacts.

Scott Durham reported on pub-



lic lands work, including recent comments on a Forest Service project. He also spoke about the long-term strain placed on volunteers who have spent decades defending public lands from repeated threats.

Dave Johnston reported that the Dolly Sods Wilderness Stewards continue to grow. New volunteers have joined both the Trailhead and Backcountry Steward programs, and several public events and trail projects are planned for the summer. The program is also developing a stronger organizational structure to support its work over the next several years.

The Board heard updates on litigation involving mining pollution, industrial facilities and Corridor H. Hugh Rogers reported that the long-awaited environmental review for the Parsons-to-Davis section of Corridor H may be released soon, although delays remain possible. Once the document is released, the public will have an opportunity to comment. It remains unclear whether the document will identify a preferred route or simply analyze the alternatives. The Federal Highway Administration appears reluctant to return to court. The West Virginia Division of Highways appears less troubled by that possibility.

Five decades later, the mountains still need what they never got

By James Branscome, Kentucky Lantern

When I published "Annihilating the Hillbilly" in 1971, the manifesto argued that the stereotyping of Appalachian people was not folklore but a tool. Coal operators, federal agencies, national media, and political elites used the hillbilly caricature to blame mountain people for conditions created by absentee ownership and extractive industries. The image was a weapon. The essay first appeared in the *Journal of the Committee of Southern Churchmen*, edited by my former Berea College professor Dr. James Y. Holloway. Fifty-five years later, the weapon is still in use, and the conditions it justified have only deepened.

I have spent the half-century since documenting what happened next. My book "Annihilating the Hillbilly Redux," releasing June 6 on Amazon, brings together 37 chapters of reporting across that span — from the Mountain Eagle of Whitesburg, Kentucky, where I have been a contributor since 1973, through the *New York Times*, the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Washington Post*, *American Heritage*, *Business Week*, the *Daily Yonder*, *Cardinal News*, the *Lantern*, and *West Virginia Watch*, among many others. The argument that runs through all of it is straightforward: Appalachia's and Eastern Kentucky's struggles are not the result of cultural failure or

individual choice. They are the predictable outcome of how institutions chose to operate in the region.

The numbers tell the story plainly. The sixty counties of Central Appalachia — 30 in Kentucky, 16 in West Virginia, seven in Virginia, seven in Tennessee — lost approximately 49,100 people between 2020 and 2025. In Kentucky's coal-field counties, the losses ran 2.5 percent. In West Virginia's coalfields, they ran 5.0 percent. The projections through 2050 are worse: Harlan County, projected to lose 44.6 percent of its remaining population. Breathitt County, 39.4 percent. Buchanan County, Virginia, 48 percent. These are not slow demographic adjustments. They are the final stages of a region being emptied.

The Appalachian Regional Commission has spent approximately \$30 billion dollars in the region since 1965. Twenty-five billion of that went to highways. The remaining \$5 billion supported people programs across 60 years. For comparison, post-Hurricane Katrina recovery in Louisiana drew well over \$100 billion dollars in a fraction of the time. The federal response to extraction, displacement, and structural collapse in Appalachia has never approached the scale of the underlying damage.

Starting with the TVA

The Tennessee Valley Authority, founded as a New Deal experiment in democratic regional development, became something else entirely. In its pursuit of the cheapest possible coal for the cheapest possible electricity, TVA introduced and aggressively expanded strip mining across eastern Kentucky and

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Five decades later, the mountains still need what they never got

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the western Kentucky coalfields — including the Paradise generating station and surrounding mines that John Prine memorialized in song. The agency could have insisted on safe deep mines, which would have preserved both jobs and the mountains. It chose instead to drive a market for surface extraction that hollowed both. The agency that was supposed to model an alternative path for the region instead became the most reliable customer of the practices that destroyed it.

And now the next chapter is being written before the previous one has been finished. Across the Appalachian states, former mine land and virgin parcels are being targeted by industrial-scale data centers serving the artificial intelligence boom. The environmental impacts are deep — water consumption at scales that strain regional supply, electricity demand that drives up residential rates for the same households living next to the facilities, particulate and noise pollution that mirrors the patterns of coal era externalities. The job creation is modest and largely temporary, concentrated in construction and short-term technical roles. The same patterns of absentee ownership, externalized environmental costs, and minimal local benefit that defined coal extraction are being replicated by the cloud computing industry. The region is being recolo-

ANNIHILATING THE HILLBILLY REDUX

*Appalachia's Struggle
Against America's Institutions*

JAMES BRANSCOME

James Branscome's new book, "Annihilating the Hillbilly Redux," will be published on June 6, 2026.

nized for its electricity and its empty land. Local communities are being told, again, that this represents opportunity.

The question my book asks is not whether Appalachia can be saved through cultural reform or individual resilience. J.D. Vance's "Hillbilly Elegy" offered that answer to millions of readers. It was the wrong answer in 2016, and it remains the wrong answer now. The question is whether American institutions will ever take responsibility for what they have done to the region — and whether the next generation of institutions will choose a different path.

Three ideas

I propose a three-part policy

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Updates on Fundamental Data: July 2026

By Luanne McGovern, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

June was another busy month in the fight against the proposed Fundamental Data Ridgeline power plant and data center complex in Tucker County.

WV Legislature Interim Session — The WV Legislature held interim meetings at Canaan Valley State Park on June 14-16 and probably regretted the location decision and timing. Tucker United did a fantastic job organizing a community gathering at the park to make their voices heard by the legislators in attendance. Events included a picnic, sign-making, music, activities for kids and a peaceful protest. Even though the Legislature held sessions on economic development, finance and tourism, the words "data centers" were never heard by attendees. Its refusal to have a meaningful discussion on this all-important topic was in direct opposition to the community's desire for engagement.

WV Democrats Hold Press Conference — Members of the WV Democratic caucus held a press conference on June 15 at the Davis Town Hall. They discussed their opposition to the Ridgeline project and plans for reform of HB 2014 during the 2027 legislative session. Priorities include restoring local control over data center development, changing the way tax revenues are allocated to the county, protecting groundwater and ensuring ratepayers are protected from increases in electrical rates. Those in attendance

included Delegates Sean Hornbuckle, Kayla Young, Evan Hansen, Mike Pushkin and Anitra Hamilton, as well as House candidates Deborah Stiles (Tucker/Grant) and Olivia Miller (Monongalia).

Data Center Panel at Davis Fire Hall — A panel discussion on data centers was sponsored by Mountain State Spotlight and facilitated by Dan Parks of Country Roads News at the Davis Fire Hall on June 15. A capacity crowd heard from Amy Margolies (executive director of Tucker United), Chris Morris (director of the WV Data Economy Office), Delegate Evan Hansen (Monongalia) and Delegate JB Akers (Kanawha). The back-and-forth discussion was constructive and focused on community opposition to these large developments and the lack of local control due to HB 2014. Chris Morris committed to establishing a citizen advisory council on data center policy within 60 days (by Aug. 15). The panel will include people from industry, environmental advocates, academia and utilities. We will be holding him to that commitment.

Confusion Continues Between Commerce and Fundamental Data — A bewildering series of letters was exchanged between the WV Department of Commerce and Fundamental Data during the month. On June 18, Nick Preservati, deputy secretary of the WV Department of Commerce, informed Fundamental Data that it was in violation of the state's requirements for filing for certification as a microgrid and high-impact data center. The department cited a May 18 meeting in Tucker County where Fundamental

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Updates on Fundamental Data: July 2026

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Data stated its intention to build data centers and therefore was required to file with the state within 30 days. Fundamental Data replied that it was not subject to this filing requirement because it had not formally stated its intentions and that “this is not how we would expect the State to treat a company that has chosen to invest in West Virginia at no cost or risk to its residents.”

To add even more confusion, on July 1, the state rescinded the violation notice after a series of phone calls and emails with Fundamental Data, which now claims that all of its plans for Ridgeline are only “conceptual.”

Land Ownership Claims – In its April 2025 air permit application to the WV Department of Environmental Protection, Fundamental Data claimed it had “an executed Purchase and Sale Agreement signed by both the Seller and Purchaser on July 19, 2024. Under this

agreement, Fundamental Data LLC has control of the proposed site.” In the June 18 Commerce letter, Nick Preservati stated: “The Department conducted a search of the deeds and other records within the Office of the Tucker County Commission and did not find any property in Tucker County owned by Fundamental Data, LLC or any of its affiliated companies.”

We believe that Fundamental Data should be required to provide proof of this land agreement, and we will be requesting that the WV DEP investigate and ensure that its air permit application did not include false information.

Things are changing fast! Stay up to date on all the breaking news about the Tucker County fight through the WVHC Facebook page, Tucker United Facebook, Country Roads News, the Parsons Advocate and Mike Tony of the Charleston Gazette-Mail.

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



Members of the West Virginia Democratic caucus at a recent Town Hall in Davis, WV. (Photo by Luanne McGovern)

Exploring West Virginia safely: What everyone should know about ticks

By Mary Felts, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy Member

When most people envision a summer in West Virginia’s forests, they think of scenic overlooks, cool mountain streams and peaceful hikes. I was fortunate enough to enjoy all of that this summer, but I also started paying closer attention to the ground beneath my feet.

As an undergraduate studying environmental studies at West Virginia Wesleyan College, I had the opportunity to work with the WWC Tick Team. This meant visiting places like Stonecoal Wildlife Management Area and Audra State Park, where we used a method called flagging to collect ticks. Flagging involves slowly dragging a square of white fabric over vegetation or leaf litter, where ticks often wait for a passing host. Every time I swept a flag through the vegetation, I was reminded that even our prettiest landscapes have hidden wildlife. One of my biggest surprises was how small ticks can be. The larval and nymph stages are so tiny that they are easy to overlook, which explains why many people do not realize they have been bitten until much later.

That experience changed how I view outdoor activities. It did not make me want to stay inside. Instead, I realized that being prepared is part of being a responsible outdoor enthusiast. Ticks are a natural

part of West Virginia’s ecosystems, and with a few simple habits, we can greatly lower our risk of tick-borne illness while still enjoying the places we love.

If you plan to hike, fish, camp, hunt or volunteer on trails this summer, take a few extra minutes to prepare. Wear insect repellent approved by the EPA, stick to the center of trails when you can and avoid brushing against tall grass and thick vegetation. Light-colored clothing can help you spot ticks more easily, and wearing long pants and sleeves offers another layer of protection.

The most important step comes after your adventure. As soon as you get home, do a thorough tick check. Pay close attention to your hairline, the area behind your ears, under your arms, around your waist and behind your knees. Showering within a couple of hours after being outdoors can also help wash away any unattached ticks. If you find a tick attached to your skin, remove it as soon as possible with fine-tipped tweezers. Grasp it close to the skin and pull straight upward with steady pressure.

Working outdoors this summer has given me a deeper appreciation for West Virginia’s public lands and the amazing variety of life they support. Our forests and parks are meant to be explored, and I hope people keep going outside to enjoy them. The goal is not to fear ticks but to be aware of them. With a little preparation and some good habits, you can spend more time making memories in the mountains and less time worrying about what might be hiding in the grass.

VDOT study finds Virginia does not need Corridor H and can handle projected traffic through 2102

By Olivia Miller, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

As West Virginia prepares to spend \$542 million building Corridor H to the state line, Virginia's transportation agency found its existing road can handle projected traffic for another 76 years.

There is a winding two-lane road on the other side of Great North Mountain, just across the West Virginia state line, that tells us a lot about the future of Corridor H.

For decades, West Virginia has continued to push Corridor H eastward through some of the most rugged and beloved terrain in the Highlands. Now, the West Virginia Division of Highways is preparing to spend roughly \$542 million to build the easternmost segment of Corridor H from Wardensville across Great North Mountain to the

Virginia state line.

But there is still no Corridor H in Virginia, and there likely will never be, at least not in many of our lifetimes.

A new Virginia Department of Transportation study makes that reality even harder to ignore. A November 2025 Route 55/US 48 (John Marshall Highway) Corridor Study examined the 14.4-mile stretch of road from the West Virginia state line to the I-81 interchange in Virginia. The study was requested to identify existing safety or operational issues and to understand how West Virginia's continued construction of Corridor H could affect traffic flow, operations, and safety conditions in Virginia.

VDOT found that Route 55/US 48 is currently operating acceptably, with level-of-service conditions of

B or better. The study also found that conditions are expected to remain acceptable through 2102, even when using a conservative 3% annual traffic growth rate. That growth rate is more than double the 1.43% rate used in West Virginia's own Corridor H Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement.

In plain terms: even if West Virginia builds Corridor H to the state line, Virginia's existing road is expected to keep functioning acceptably for generations.

The study also states that while West Virginia plans to fully construct Corridor H, there are no current plans to do so in Virginia. Virginia's Commonwealth Transportation Board selected a location for Corridor H in Virginia in 1993, but rescinded its support two years later following significant public

disapproval.

The study does identify real safety concerns along Route 55/US 48, including crash hot spots, roadway departure risks, and several intersections where targeted safety improvements may be appropriate. But those concerns do not support a new four-lane highway across the mountain. VDOT instead points to focused safety measures, such as improved signage, rumble strips, pavement markings, and possible intersection improvements.

This is exactly the kind of practical, targeted approach West Virginia should be considering before spending hundreds of millions of dollars to force Corridor H through the last remaining stretch to the Virginia line.

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Appalachianization update: How the data center boom is making America's economy look like Appalachia's

By Sean O'Leary, Ohio River Valley Institute

Last December, I wrote a blog post titled, "The Appalachianization of America's Economy", in which I observed that the AI and data center boom, which has recently been a principal driver of overall GDP growth, seems to be giving rise to a recurrence of a phenomenon previously seen in Appalachia's natural gas regions – a sharp increase in growth as measured by GDP accompanied by stagnation or outright declines in local measures of prosperity, including jobs, incomes, and population.

Recent data bear this out. Since 2005, real GDP in the US has grown by just over 50%, but the Information sector, driven largely by AI and data centers, has grown by almost three times. Yet, employment in the Information sector has actually declined.

This disconnect between GDP growth and growth in jobs not only undercuts the value of GDP as a measure of general prosperity, it



A foggy sunrise atop a West Virginia mountain range.
(Photo by Luanne McGovern)

also signals another problem – a rising share of income allocated to capital accompanied by a decline in income allocated to labor. This is an inevitable consequence of the growing importance of a capital-intensive and non-labor-intensive sector, such as Information, and it is an engine for growing income and wealth inequality.

Recent pieces by Harold Meyerson and Jared Bernstein, who provides the following chart, discuss this problem in greater detail.

But it's also important to understand that growing income and wealth inequality doesn't occur just along class lines. It occurs along geographic lines as well. As hyperscalers seek locations that offer access to abundant and inexpensive energy, communities in rural parts of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Texas, and other states are seeing a proliferation of data centers that generate immense amounts of investment and revenue, all of which counts toward GDP, but because

data centers are so non-labor-intensive, very little of the money that is invested or the revenue the facilities generate lands in local economies.

The most readily available remedy for this problem is taxes, which can generate large windfalls for host communities. That's a key point in a recent piece by Jane Flegal, who suggests ways in which we can make data centers good citizens.

However, many communities and states are abating or providing exemptions for sales and property taxes in order to encourage data center development. Tragically, this ensures that data centers, as prolific in generating revenue as they might be, will provide negligible local economic benefit. As a result, many of these communities will likely fall into the same trap that many Appalachian communities did during the natural gas boom, when they experienced skyrocketing GDP growth accompanied by relentless declines in jobs, incomes, population, and overall prosperity.

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Solar overtakes coal in US electricity for the first month on record

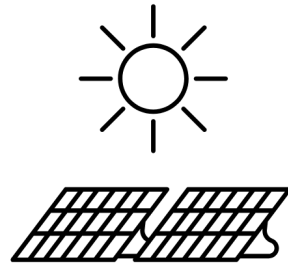
By Ember

New solar records and long-term coal decline lead to latest clean power milestone

New York, 10 June 2026 – Solar overtook coal generation in the US electricity mix for the first month on record in May 2026, according to official monthly and preliminary hourly generation data analysed by global energy think tank Ember. Solar supplied a record 12.8% of US electricity, while coal fell to 12.2%, its fourth-lowest monthly share ever.

In May 2026, solar generated an all-time high total of 45.5 TWh, exceeding output in May 2025 by 17% and surpassing the previous record set in July last year. This record could be broken again in the coming summer months. While total solar output typically peaks in June or July, its share of the electricity mix is often highest in April or May, when strong solar output coincides with more moderate demand before summer cooling needs increase. In May, solar also became the third-largest source of electricity in the US, behind gas and nuclear.

Coal generation hit an all-time monthly low of 39.3 TWh in April 2026. Although coal output rose slightly to 43.4 TWh in May,



it remained 11% below May 2025 levels. The modest rebound was outweighed by an increase in solar generation, allowing solar to overtake coal in the US electricity mix for the first month on record.

The share of coal generation in the US mix has nearly halved in the last five years, falling from 19.7% in May 2021 to 12.2% in May 2026. In contrast, solar power's share of the mix more than doubled from 5.4% to 12.8% over the same period.

Solar overtaking coal follows another clean power milestone reached in March, when renewables collectively generated more electricity than gas for the first time in the US. Taken together, these milestones underscore the growing role of clean power in the US electricity mix, despite a challenging policy environment for clean power projects.

“US solar power continues to set new records. Overtaking coal for the first month on record shows just how far solar has come, from a niche contributor to the third-largest and fastest-growing source of power in the US electricity system,” said Nicolas Fulghum, Senior Data Analyst at Ember. “From Texas to California, markets across the US are betting on solar to meet rising power needs.”

Five decades later, the mountains still need what they never got

Continued from page 7

framework for that different path, scaled to Central Appalachia specifically rather than to the broader rural United States.

First, an Ascend Central Appalachia talent-attraction program, modeled on West Virginia's Ascend program. The West Virginia version, launched in 2021 by a public-private partnership led by Brad Smith — former CEO of Intuit and now president of Marshall University in Huntington — and his wife Alys, has drawn nearly 1,000 new residents to the state through cash incentives, free outdoor recreation, and community-building support. Participants receive \$12,000 plus benefits; the program reports a retention rate above 96 percent. A version scaled for Central Appalachia would specifically target the coalfield counties whose population losses are most acute, with structural support for housing, childcare, and broadband.

Second, a contemporary Appalachian Homestead Act, modeled on the 1862 legislation that opened the American West, transferring land currently held by absentee corporations into the hands of people willing to settle and build communities in the region. The legal mechanisms

exist. What has been missing is political will.

Third, a time-limited Universal Basic Income experiment scaled to the specific economic challenges of Central Appalachia. A regional pilot, run for five or seven years, testing whether direct income support can stabilize communities, reverse outmigration, and provide the floor that decades of policy has refused to construct.

These are not utopian proposals. They are mechanisms that have been used elsewhere, in other regions facing other crises, with measurable results. They cost a fraction of what is being spent on highway projects that serve through-traffic rather than the communities they pass through. They could begin tomorrow if the federal and state governments chose to begin.

The mountains do not need to be saved through the heroic exertions of the people who live there. They need to be treated, finally, as a region whose institutions failed it — and as a region whose recovery requires the same scale of public investment and creative policy that the country has marshaled for every other place it has chosen to value.

What my book documents, across 55 years of reporting, is that the choice has always been there. Appalachia has never been beyond saving. It has been beneath bothering to save.

That is the real elegy. And it is one Kentucky and the nation still have time to correct.



These mountains bring us together.
Now they need us to stand together.
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