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Madtoms: Small catfish that play a big role in West Virginia’s waters

By Cameron Layne, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

West Virginia serves as an angler’s paradise for species such as muskie, brook trout and smallmouth bass. Among such desirable gamefish are catfishes, which are stocked in water bodies like ponds and reservoirs across the Mountain State. Channel, blue and flathead catfish are catfish species that commonly attract angling attention among residents of West Virginia. They are typically sought after for consumption, although agencies such as the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources raise select catfish species for numerous reasons, including restoration efforts (WVDNR 2026). However, our state also harbors a unique variety of stream-adapted



Photo of an adult Margined Madtom from the New River in West Virginia.
(Photo provided by Christa Clasgens)

catfishes often not encountered by the average angler.

Madtoms are a distinctive group of catfishes that inhabit West Virginia’s rivers, creeks and streams. Rarely exceeding a few inches in length, these riverine catfishes are

seldom targeted for sport or game, let alone observed during the day. Madtoms can be distinguished from other species of catfish most notably by their adipose fin. The adipose fin is a small, fleshy fin located on the back of certain fishes, such

as trout and catfishes, between the dorsal (top) fin and caudal (tail) fin. In madtoms, the adipose fin is connected to the caudal fin, forming what looks like an extension of the tail fin that goes up and around the top of the fish. In other catfishes, like channel catfish or bullheads, the adipose fin is characteristically separate from the caudal and dorsal fins. This is the most reliable method of identifying madtoms from other catfishes, among additional features such as coloration and patterning.

Five species of madtoms call West Virginia home, with ranges reaching from the Ohio River across the state into the eastern panhandle. The largest and most common of the madtoms that can be found in our
Continued on page 2

What’s inside:

Madtoms cont.	2	Off the beaten path: Katydid	5	Become a member	9
Native vs. wild fish	2	Corridor H: Facts vs. myths	6	Join our email list	10
Thoughts from our President	3	Fundamental Data’s latest PR disasters	6	Stronger water standards for WV	10
Store catalog	4	More rollbacks for endangered species	7	Donate to our data center advocacy fund	12

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Madtoms: Small catfish that play a big role in West Virginia's waters

Continued from page 1

streams and rivers is the stonecat, which can reach lengths of up to 12 inches at maximum size. However, achieving this length in the wild is rarely, if ever, observed. Stonecats are native to the Ohio River drainage of West Virginia, whereas their look-alike counterpart, the margined madtom, is native to the Atlantic Slope drainage in the eastern panhandle. These drainages are split by the eastern continental divide at the origin of the eastern panhandle. Margined madtoms can be identified apart from stonecats primarily by the black trim along the margins of their fins, as well as by range and size. This species, like many other non-gamefishes, has been introduced into waters outside of its native range, including the New River drainage, which hosts many of our unique species endemic to the watershed. Luckily, their size, distribution and habitat requirements make them arguably a lesser threat than other species introduced outside of their ranges in our state.

The brindled madtom, northern madtom and mountain madtom comprise the remaining madtom species that can be found in West Virginia. These three species are often referred to as the “saddled madtom” group, referring to the patterns of dark saddles that are typically

present along the top of their bodies. The saddled madtoms are the smallest of their kind, often not exceeding four inches in length as fully grown adults. Their similar patterning and coloration, paired with their adult sizes, can make them difficult to identify from one another. Their native distribution is similar to the stonecat's, usually only observed in riverine environs of the Ohio River drainage. Madtom species can be found coexisting with one another, with oftentimes brindled madtoms and stonecats being the most widely distributed among their native ranges.

Madtoms require clean, clear, flowing water with an abundance of flat cobbles and boulders to hide under during the day. They will emerge at night and utilize their barbels, or “whiskers,” to search for prey along the bottom of the river, similar to many other catfishes. Their aversion to light can be attributed to poor eyesight. Therefore, they have evolved to rely on their barbels as highly sensitive organs to detect organisms like macroinvertebrates to feed on. Madtoms can most often be found in well-oxygenated areas such as riffles and runs where there is often an abundance of insect larvae to feed on and flat stones for nesting. These catfish are typically signs of good water quality and are often some of the first species to disappear from an ecosystem when water becomes impacted. For this reason and many others, madtoms are worth as much attention as their sportfish relatives. Although they will never reach sizes near the potential of other catfishes, their presence leaves a substantial impression on the health of West Virginia's waters.

Christa's catch: Native vs. wild fish

By Christa Clasgens West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

A long-winded debate among anglers that's actually quite simple – is it a native or a wild fish? Oftentimes, anglers mistakenly use these two words interchangeably. The truth behind these definitions is quite staggering. In today's world, West Virginia boasts multiple species of trout, including brook, brown and rainbow trout, alongside the hybrid tiger trout and genetically modified golden rainbow trout. Only one of these trout species is truly native to not only West Virginia but all of Appalachia. The brook trout has been Appalachia's only native trout for approximately 1.6 million years and still is!

Before human arrival, these fish occurred naturally on the eastern side of the U.S., uninhibited by outside forces, and today they survive in typically smaller, cold-water streams across the higher-elevation mountains of Appalachia. The irony of the brook trout is that it is not considered a true trout, but a char! The char family is closely related to trout but differs in a few biological ways, such as markings, color, tail shape and more. But trout and char belong to the Salmonidae family and share many of the same traits.

It's likely the few similarities between these two groups of fish confuse anglers, but history can highlight how we've arrived at our modern fisheries today. The rainbow trout was first introduced to Appalachia during the late 1870s by fed-



A wild rainbow trout from a cold-water creek in Grant county. (Photo by Christa Clasgens)

eral and state fish commissions to offset the collapse of native brook trout due to industrial timber clearing. They were brought from Pacific slope drainages, bred and stocked in the waters we fish today.

Not long after the rainbow, the brown trout made its debut in America. The brown trout is native to Europe, with the introductions in America likely originating from Germany. Brown trout eggs were harvested and brought by boat to North America in the 1880s, later making their first appearance in Appalachia shortly after. This trout species introduction was intended to provide a prized game fishery while also offsetting the collapse of native brook trout.

In West Virginia, our state hatcheries still breed and stock rainbow and brown trout, and in some

Continued on page 9

Thoughts from our President

Greetings!

I hope you are all having an enjoyable summer. Here in Canaan, the weather has been cool most days, and as I write this, a big thunderstorm is moving in.

This month, my letter is a plea for support.

Every day brings another challenge for the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy. Environmental laws and policies are changing quickly, and our Board, staff and volunteers are working hard to keep up and respond. We are fortunate to have many allies and partners, but this work also depends on the support of our members. Here are just a few examples of what we are working on:

WVHC is involved in two appeals before the West Virginia Intermediate Court of Appeals concerning Fundamental Data's proposed Ridgeline project. In one case, WVHC, Tucker United and the Sierra Club challenged the air permit issued by the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection. The Air Quality Board rejected most of our challenge, and we have appealed that decision. In a separate case, WVHC, Tucker United and Friends of Blackwater are challenging WVDEP's decision to allow large portions of Fundamental Data's permit application to be with-



A deer exploring a meadow alongside Becky's Creek in Huttonsville, WV.
(Photo by Jordan Howes)

held from the public as confidential business information.

Our work to protect the South Fork of the Cherry River has also entered a new phase. South Fork Coal's bankruptcy left serious pollution and reclamation problems unresolved. Our case challenging the company's use of a haul road through the Monongahela National Forest ended after the Forest Service terminated its road-use permit—an

important result. A separate water-pollution case against South Fork was placed on hold because of the bankruptcy.

Now, Clearco and Aurevo have begun taking over South Fork's former operations. WVHC and our partners have issued new notices of intent to sue over the unauthorized use of the coal haul road through the national forest, alleged unpermitted pollution from seven surface mines

and numerous reclamation violations.

WVHC and the West Virginia Rivers Coalition are also suing Amsted Graphite Materials in federal court over repeated alleged violations of its water-pollution permit at the company's manufacturing plant in Anmoore. The pollutants enter Anmoore Run and eventually flow into Elk Creek, the West Fork River and the Monongahela River. Our lawsuit seeks to require the company to comply with its permit, stop further violations and complete the necessary pollution-control upgrades. Amsted has responded by asking the court to dismiss the case.

On the national level, WVHC is one of several organizations represented by Earthjustice in a challenge to EPA's repeal of the 2009 Endangerment Finding and federal greenhouse-gas standards for motor vehicles. The Endangerment Finding is EPA's scientific determination that greenhouse-gas pollution threatens public health and welfare. Its repeal would undermine the federal government's ability to address climate pollution.

Legal advocacy is only part of our work. Through the Dolly Sods Wilderness Stewards program, in partnership with the Monongahela

Continued on page 5

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 Cotton Hat (Black): \$22.50
- WVHC Hemp Hat (Black or Green): \$25.00
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- Square Black Bandana: \$5.00

Please include \$6.25 shipping for Apparel items

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- 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 40, Granville, WV 26534. 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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Thoughts from our President

Continued from page 3

National Forest, volunteers greet visitors at trailheads, share Leave No Trace guidance, monitor back-country conditions, maintain trails and registration stations, protect impacted campsites and even extinguish unattended campfires when they encounter them.

These are only a few examples of what the Highlands Conservancy takes on every day. We urgently need your help. Renewing your membership, making an additional donation, purchasing something from our store or volunteering your time all help keep this work moving.

I also hope you will join us for our annual Fall Review, October 23–25 at Canaan Valley Resort. It will be a chance to learn more about the issues facing West Virginia, reconnect with fellow members and supporters, and strengthen our work for the year ahead.

For decades, our members and supporters have kept the Highlands Conservancy strong. With your help, we will continue protecting West Virginia's mountains, forests and streams for as long as we are needed.

Thank you for standing with us. I hope to see you at Fall Review!

Marilyn Shoenfeld
President
West Virginia Highlands
Conservancy

Off the beaten path: Katydid

By Cindy Berdine, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

There is a time and a season for everything. I must pause right now and take this moment to disclose in complete transparency that summer is NOT my favorite season of the year, except for one thing: katydids! I love the night sounds that happen in summer, specifically the sounds that katydids make. Why do you ask? Because they are signaling summer's end. Hip! Hip! Hooray! Folklore tells us that about the time katydids start to sing, it is just six short weeks until the first autumn frost. You see, fall IS my favorite time of year.

There are all sorts of folklore stories that talk about katydids and how they got their name, their little song or the night noise they make. In my opinion, katydids are some of the most fascinating insects. Katydids may also be called bush crickets, or a long time ago, they were even called long-horned grasshoppers. Katydids belong to the order Orthoptera, which they share with crickets and grasshoppers. Katydids belong to the family Tettigoniidae.

There are all kinds of katydids, with 8,000 different species worldwide, to be almost exact. True katydids (*Pterophylla camellifolia*), interestingly enough, only have four species in North America. The three most common types found in West Virginia are the greater angle-wing katydid (*Microcentrum rhombifolium*), the common true katydid (*Pterophylla camellifolia*) and the oblong-winged katydid (*Amblyco-*



rypha oblongifolia).

The oblong-winged katydid comes in different colors: green, tan, pink, dark tan, yellow or orange, with pink actually being its dominant color. How cool is that? Another noteworthy piece of information: if a pink adult breeds with a green adult, they produce a half-pink, half-green offspring. Unfortunately, the pink katydid stands out in nature, so it can become easy prey.

The common true katydid is the noisiest, with its “ch-ch-ch” and then maybe a “katydid-did-did” or just a single “katydid.” I think it is fun listening to them at night and hearing how they communicate with each other. If you are lucky, sometimes you may even hear them form a duet and sing together.

Different species have different mating calls. Some are trying to catch a mate, defend their territory or stake their ground. Katydids that live in seasonal areas typically live less than one year and only produce one generation of offspring. The egg stage of a katydid's life cycle is the only stage capable of surviving the winter season.

Katydid have a remarkable defense system because they fly very poorly, if at all, so they hop,

leaving themselves very susceptible to predators. They camouflage themselves among the tops of trees or in leaf matter. Bats are one of their predators.

Some key features in identifying katydids are their antennae. They are extremely long and can sometimes be two to three times their body length. A katydid can be as big as your thumb. They are usually green, with remarkable vein patterns mimicking a leaf. Their legs are powerful and adapted for jumping; their femurs are thicker than their other leg segments. They hear through their forelegs rather than their abdomen like other grasshoppers. They are primarily nocturnal and are heard more than they are seen.

So, if you have nothing better to do tonight, here is one more folklore fact you can try with katydid sounds. You can discover the temperature of the night by counting how many times a katydid calls in a minute, adding 161 to that number, then dividing by three. That should equal the temperature.

I know what I am going to try tonight when I listen to this wonderful summertime symphony of sounds.

Myths and facts: What to know about Corridor H

By Bonni McKeown, Stewards of the Potomac Highlands

Stewards of the Potomac Highlands and Virginia Wilderness Committee have provided the following information to address some of the common claims and questions surrounding WVDOH's proposal to build the seven-mile section of Corridor H from the western edge of Wardensville in eastern Hardy County to the Virginia line. Media coverage has often focused on the "Build-It" narrative, and we believe it is important that the public also have access to information about the concerns surrounding the proposed project. We present this fact sheet as an information source for future news stories.

MYTH: Corridor H will connect I-79 with I-66 and I-81 at Strasburg, Va.

FACT: Though Corridor H was originally proposed to reach 15 miles inside the Virginia line to Strasburg, Virginia, transportation agencies went on record in 1995 as refusing to build the four-lane. The Virginia Department of Transportation reaffirmed its position in a 2025 report that the current two-lane is acceptable through 2102.

Corridor H Authority still circulates maps with the I-66 and I-81 connection, but WVDOH's contested seven-mile Wardensville-to-Virginia-line project has the four-lane highway abruptly ending at the state line, funneling into two-lane Route 55.

MYTH: WVDOH has done adequate environmental studies, and there are no major issues in the Wardensville-to-Virginia-line section of Corridor H.

FACT: WVDOH has done its studies, but with no consideration of any alternative to building a four-lane. WVDOH acknowledges a public water supply threat in Wardensville. Corridor H would tear through the Andersons Ridge aquifer on the southern edge of Wardensville and blast through Great North Mountain on the West Virginia-Virginia border, including George Washington National Forest scenic areas, with unknown effects on trout stream tributaries of the Cacapon River and the groundwater in this area of sandstone/limestone geology.

Also, bypassing Wardensville's historic Main Street, Corridor H would harm local businesses that have worked for nearly 20 years to revitalize the community. WVDOH's Environmental Assessment documented these issues, suggesting mitigation measures, but failed to consider spot safety improvements to Route 55 as an alternative to building this four-lane section.

MYTH: Appalachian corridors are required to be four-lane in design.

FACT: Parts of Appalachian Corridor K in North Carolina and Tennessee are built as two- and three-lane highways to avoid environmental impacts there. Such an approach might save money in West Virginia.



Another month, another series of public relations disasters by the folks at Fundamental Data

By Luanne McGovern, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

City council brouhaha in Belmont, North Carolina

Ted McGavran is an engineer working for Fundamental Data. He has been seen around the project for many months, showing up at the Air Quality Board hearings in Charleston in December 2025, and online at the May 16 Davis Town Hall. He also appears to be a member of the Environmental Sustainability Board for the city of Belmont, North Carolina, where he appeared before the City Council on July 6, 2026. At the meeting (recorded and distributed on YouTube), McGavran made numerous statements about the Ridge-line project, West Virginia and HB 2014. A few notable quotes include:

"We were the guys that basically wrote the bill [HB 2014] and basically got it through the legislature in 2024 and 2025 ... and that gave us the opportunity to set out rules for ... a microgrid."

"We can do pretty much whatever we want to do up there."

"It's the middle of nowhere."

When this information was reported by Country Roads News, the backlash was immediate. From Governor Morrissey's spokesperson

Lars Dalseide, in a statement: "HB 2014 was the Governor's bill, and the drafting was deliberately limited to the Governor's office to ensure the legislation reflected Governor Morrissey's vision and priorities."

And from the governor himself on X: "This so-called representative is fabricating this story – he should be ashamed of himself. No respectable company would allow someone who represents them to mislead the media and the public like this. I've been worried about how this company has handled itself from the beginning. They need to be much better. Shame on them."

Fundamental Data also issued a statement that "Fundamental Data did not draft, write or play any role in drafting HB 2014. Mr. McGavran is not authorized to speak on behalf of the company." One wonders if Ted is now looking for a new job.

Does Fundamental Data actually own the land?

On July 16, a letter on behalf of Tucker United, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, Friends of Blackwater and the Sierra Club was sent to the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, requesting clarification on whether Fundamental Data actually owns or controls the land for the Ridge-line project. The permit application states that "Fundamental Data LLC has an executed purchase and sale agreement signed by both the seller and purchaser on July 19, 2024." But no public record can be found of this agreement, and the West Virginia DEP did not respond previously to comments on this land ownership issue. If Fundamental Data presented false information in its application,

Continued on page 8

Trump administration scales back endangered species protections again

By Rebecca Schneid and T. Michelle Murphy, MSN News

The United States Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service on Friday updated its rules for implementing the Endangered Species Act (ESA)—a move that could erode protections for plants and animals that are already at risk, experts say. It revives policies first pursued during President Donald Trump's first term and comes just one week after another contentious ESA rule change.

The latest rules end automatic protections for newly listed threatened species and revise how economic impacts are weighed when designating critical habitats.

The first change involves what's known as the "blanket rule," which for decades has automatically granted "threatened" species—those that are likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future—comprehensive protections, such as prohibiting the killing, trapping, or harassing of the species. They are generally the same protections extended to endangered species, which are at risk of going extinct.

The "blanket rule" (also known as the blanket 4(d) rule) went into effect for wildlife in 1975 and was extended to plants in 1977. This came just a few years after the ESA was signed into law in 1973, when the FWS found itself dealing with a backlog of imperiled species that did not have individualized protection plans. The blanket rule allowed the FWS to quickly extend baseline protections to threatened species while proceeding to develop



A Candy Darter, an endangered West Virginia native whose survival depends on clean, healthy streams. (Photo provided by Cameron Layne)

species-specific regulations, and the ESA has since been credited with preventing the extinction of 99% of listed species.

Now, newly listed threatened species will only receive protections on a case-by-case basis.

Today's decision amounts to an utter abdication of the federal government's responsibility to protect America's wildlife," Sara Amundson, president of nonprofit Humane World Action Fund said Friday. "Rescinding the blanket 4(d) rule will undermine safeguards for threatened species while creating unnecessary hurdles that will slow future protection."

She said that the implementation of species-specific regulations offers "no comfort," writing: "That process is far more time-consuming and resource-intensive, making de-

lays in protecting vulnerable wildlife all but inevitable."

This is not the first time that the Trump Administration has tried to restrict regulations for implementing the ESA. The FWS originally rescinded the blanket rule in 2019, but it was re-established by President Joe Biden in 2024.

At the time, the FWS also adopted a rule changing how economic impacts are evaluated when deciding whether to exclude areas from critical habitat designation—a policy that was reinstated on July 17.

Critical habitat designation is primarily a regulatory mechanism used by the federal government to ensure federal actions do not jeopardize habitat essential to listed species. It requires a formal review of any federal projects, funding, or

development that might impact the area.

Supporters say allowing greater consideration of the economic impacts of the designation will reduce unnecessary burdens on landowners and development projects. However, conservation groups counter that it will make it easier to exclude habitats in the name of cost effectiveness.

Secretary of the Interior Scott Burgum said in last week's announcement that the shift in policy "will lower costs for Americans and lead to more species successfully coming off the Endangered Species List—two things all Americans can celebrate."

Burgum also said that 97% of threatened species are still on the list today—a source of frustration for Republican lawmakers, who say that longstanding habitat protections hamper economic development in their districts.

But experts told TIME in 2019 that the changes threatened endangered plants and animals and could even "undermine the strength of the ESA." They were reversed under President Joe Biden in 2024.

After Biden's reversal, two groups—the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, a pro-hunting organization, and the Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), which researches free-market environmentalism—sued the Administration, arguing that the rule unfairly imposed those restrictions on landowners even after a species' status

Continued on page 8

Another month, another series of public relations disasters by the folks at Fundamental Data

Continued from page 7

the air permit should be suspended or revoked.

Initially, the West Virginia DEP responded in a media statement that “West Virginia air permitting laws do not require an applicant to own the property to apply for an air permit.” But on July 31, the West Virginia DEP did an about-face and sent a letter to Fundamental Data requesting proof of ownership and control status. “The Division of Air Quality issued the permit based on that information and the certification of truth, accuracy, and completeness provided in the application,” wrote Director Laura Crowder. A response was required by Aug. 7.

Other news!

During a public meeting on Aug. 4, Governor Morrissey brought up Tucker County and Fundamental Data. “Let me tell you, Tucker County was the wrong way. I’m not afraid to tell you that. These guys got out in front, and they didn’t do it the right way. They didn’t engage the community. I want to make sure that happens, right? Because that’s what people deserve.”

There are two appeals of the Ridgeline air permit pending before the Intermediate Court of Appeals,



Ted McGavran speaking to the Belmont city council in North Carolina.

with no scheduled hearing dates. Appeal 25-ICA-391 was filed by local attorney Brent Eason and questions the large amount of redacted and confidential information in the permit application. Appeal 26-ICA-92 was filed by Appalachian Mountain Advocates and requests that the decision made by the Air Quality Board to uphold the permit be rescinded. Two of the ICA judges have been recused from the cases, and Judge Greer was defeated in the recent election.

During the panel session in Davis on June 15, Chris Morris, director of the West Virginia Data Economy Office, 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.

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



Trump administration scales back endangered species protections again

Continued from page 7

improves.

These groups celebrated the latest reversal: “For too long, the blanket rule treated threatened species the same as endangered ones, dulling incentives for recovery,” said Jonathan Wood, vice president of law and policy for PERC, in a statement July 18.

The rollback also comes amid a broader effort to reinterpret the ESA.

One week prior, the FWS and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration redefined the meaning of “harm” under the ESA, making it so that damaging or destroying an endangered species’ habitat is no longer, by itself, considered harming that species under the law. Going forward, the word only refers to “an act which actually kills or injures wildlife.”

In response, a coalition of nine environmental groups and two Native American tribes filed lawsuits saying that the move violates the ESA’s statutory language and inhibits its fundamental goals.

The latest revisions are also expected to face legal challenges and, taken together with last week’s change to the definition of “harm,” mark a broader effort by the admin-

istration to reshape implementation of the ESA.

‘A one-way ticket to extinction’

The Center for Biological Diversity, a nonprofit working to protect endangered species, said that these new rules could leave many species with little to no protection.

“These rules are a one-way ticket to extinction for our most imperiled animals and plants, from monarch butterflies to giraffes to alligator snapping turtles,” Noah Greenwald, endangered species co-director at the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement July 17. “Trump is bending over backward for corporate polluters by ripping away the blanket that protects so many struggling wildlife species, as well as the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the natural places where we seek peace of mind.”

The organization said that it will challenge the ruling in court.

Clay Samford, an attorney with the environmental law nonprofit Earthjustice, said in a statement that the bureaucracy that is now required to outline specific protections for imperiled species will leave them vulnerable for an indeterminate period.

“Rather than automatically protecting threatened species, like Florida manatees, so they don’t slip closer to extinction, the new rule leaves them unprotected while the agency does potentially years more paperwork to decide what protections they should receive,” Samford said.

The Earthjustice statement also said that the Trump Administration is allowing resource extraction in-

Continued on page 11

Christa’s catch: Native vs. wild fish

Continued from page 2

prime areas where they are able to survive without intervention, they naturally reproduce. A fish that exists in any stream or waterway by natural means is considered wild. These fish are significant in our waterways as well. When a fish can reproduce, and its offspring survive to adulthood, this is a great indication of stream health. Trout are very sensitive to pollutants, higher water temperatures and lack of available biomass or food in the ecosystem of the waters they inhabit. So wild, naturally reproducing trout tell us a great deal about how healthy and naturally sustainable any given waterway can be.

It is important to understand



A tiger trout – a hybrid mix between a brown and a brook trout.
(Photo by Christa Clasgens)

that even if trout like rainbow, brown, tiger and golden rainbow are inhabiting our waterways either through natural means or through human intervention, they are all

technically non-native and, in some cases, invasive. Each of these trout can be contributing to outcompeting or directly impacting the survival of our native brook trout that have been

struggling since the timber industry. There’s a reason the brook trout is our state fish – it’s our only native trout species; all others were brought to the Mountain State by human intervention. The beauty of the brook trout not only serves as a sign of native Appalachian significance, but as a symbol of native species importance as well.



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WVHC supports stronger water quality standards for West Virginia

By Jordan Howes, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

Clean, healthy water is one of West Virginia's greatest natural resources, and protecting it requires water-quality standards that keep pace with science. As the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) begins its triennial review of the state's water-quality standards, the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy is supporting recommendations from the West Virginia Rivers Coalition and its member organizations to strengthen protections for West Virginia's streams and rivers.

The West Virginia Rivers Coalition submitted comments to DEP on Aug. 3 outlining seven major issues that should be considered as the state develops revisions to its water-quality standards for the 2028 legislative session. The recommendations are based on U.S. Environmental Protection Agency guidance, recent scientific research and developments in DEP programs.

One of the recommendations calls for DEP to develop water-

quality standards for conductivity to protect aquatic life. Conductivity measures the ability of water to conduct an electrical current and can indicate elevated concentrations of dissolved ions. DEP already recognizes that ionic toxicity can have significant impacts on aquatic life and is developing total maximum daily loads to address the issue in tributaries of the lower Guyandotte River basin. The EPA has also developed a conductivity benchmark for protecting aquatic life in Central Appalachian streams and rivers outside karst regions. Establishing a statewide water-quality standard would provide DEP with another important tool for protecting aquatic ecosystems.

The coalition also recommends that West Virginia adopt the EPA's recommended water-column criterion for selenium. EPA revised its recommended selenium criterion for aquatic life in 2016, including monthly average exposure levels for both still-water and flowing-water ecosystems. The coalition notes that fish-tissue concentrations

are important when evaluating selenium contamination, but they may not provide reliable protection in locations where a new source of selenium has not yet reached equilibrium with fish tissue. Adopting the EPA's recommended water-column criteria would provide an additional layer of protection for aquatic life.

The recommendations also address pollutants that can affect human health. The coalition is asking DEP to incorporate additional EPA Priority Pollutants into West Virginia's water-quality standards. DEP added five additional human-health criteria to its standards in 2025, a decision supported by West Virginia Rivers Coalition. The coalition is now recommending that 24 more Priority Pollutants be regulated. These include chemicals such as acrolein, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and volatile organic compounds that can pose significant health risks. Importantly, the coalition points out that pollutants do not necessarily respect state boundaries. Chemicals originating in neighboring states can affect

West Virginia residents, particularly along the Ohio River floodplain, where surface water and groundwater are strongly connected.

The coalition's recommendations also recognize the importance of protecting West Virginia's wild trout streams. It is calling for DEP to develop watershed-based trout water designations rather than relying on individual stream segments. Wild trout are important ecologically, culturally and economically, and both the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources and the Monongahela National Forest recognize their importance. The coalition argues that trout populations are influenced primarily by processes occurring across entire watersheds, making watershed-level designations more appropriate for monitoring and protection. For an organization dedicated to protecting the highlands and watersheds of West Virginia, this approach makes particular sense. Healthy trout populations depend on healthy watersheds, not simply isolated sections of individual streams.

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WVHC supports stronger water quality standards for West Virginia

Continued from page 10

Another recommendation focuses on ammonia, for which the coalition is asking DEP to revise its water-quality standards based on updated scientific research. In 2022, EPA recommended that DEP update its standards based on new research into ammonia toxicity, particularly its effects on sensitive freshwater mussels and gilled snails found in West Virginia. The coalition supports retaining DEP's existing framework, which recognizes the relationship between temperature, pH and the conversion of less-toxic ammonium into toxic ammonia. Instead, it recommends updating the numeric criteria using the latest information on species sensitivity.

PFAS, or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, are another growing concern addressed in the recommendations. The coalition recommends that DEP develop water-quality standards for PFAS to protect human health. West Virginia's PFAS Protection Act requires the state to adopt federal maximum contaminant levels for public water systems regulated under the Safe Drinking Water Act. At the same time, many West Virginia public water systems do not remove PFAS

from raw water. Establishing water-quality standards for PFAS would help protect source waters and could assist municipal water systems in meeting forthcoming federal drinking-water requirements.

Finally, the coalition is asking DEP to strengthen scientific integrity within the rules governing water-quality standards. Scientific integrity is essential to effective environmental protection. The coalition notes that recent legislative sessions considered proposals that could have restricted state agencies' ability to use the best available science when developing and implementing water-quality standards. Although those proposals were rejected, the coalition believes similar proposals could return in future legislative sessions. **The recommendation is straightforward, DEP's rules should explicitly require the use of the best available science, including peer-reviewed research and reports from technical experts.**

Water-quality standards may sound technical, but they have very real consequences for the streams, rivers and communities of West Virginia. They determine how pollutants are regulated and provide an important foundation for protecting aquatic life and human health.

The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy supports efforts to ensure that these standards reflect the best available science and provide meaningful protection for the state's waters.

Trump administration scales back endangered species protections again

Continued from page 8

dustries to put their thumb on the scale when it comes to which habitat gets protected or destroyed.

It said that the new rules will be particularly damaging in Hawaii, which is home to species like the 'i'iwi bird that do not exist anywhere else on Earth. The bird "is currently awaiting critical habitat designation where cattle ranchers have asked for areas to be excluded," Earthjustice said. Other examples provided in the statement are green sea turtles, monarch butterflies, polar bears, Canada lynxes, sage-grouse, and the Texas horn shell.

The Humane World for Animals and the Humane World Action Fund released a joint statement calling the new rules a "profound failure," explaining that they make way for oil and gas, mining, logging, and other resource extraction industries to pursue new projects on land that the ESA has safeguarded for decades.

They are among the environmental protection groups pointing out that critical habitat loss can push threatened species closer to becoming



Pictured is the endangered Hellbender, a giant Appalachian salamander and indicator of healthy, clean streams.

(Photo by Sam Scherck)

ing endangered.

Habitat loss is the "primary threat to the survival of wildlife in the United States," according to the National Wildlife Federation. The FWS itself said in 2023 that habitat protection has saved species like the bald eagle from the brink of extinction.

In order for a species to be protected under the ESA, there must be evidence of habitat loss, over-exploitation, disease, or other man-made or natural factors threatening the species.

Currently, the ESA protects 1,662 species in the U.S. It also safeguards 638 species abroad through restrictions on trade, import, and export, along with other conservation measures.



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