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# *The Highlands Voice*

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

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## **Conservation groups condemn recent mass firings at US Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service**

By Olivia Miller, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, the Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance, and Friends of the 500th have condemned the Trump administration's decision to terminate thousands of U.S. Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service employees across the country. The layoffs affect crucial staff—including many who live and work in West Virginia and Virginia—who have long served as stewards of our shared natural heritage.

According to recent reports, approximately 3,400 U.S. Forest Service employees (10% of the workforce), 1,000 National Park Service staff (5% of the workforce), and 1,300 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees have been fired, many while still in their probationary period. The Monongahela National Forest—which was already chronically understaffed—now faces even greater challenges. The Canaan



Valley National Wildlife Refuge and the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, which stretch into parts of West Virginia and Virginia, face the same crisis.

This is a moment of profound upheaval in the agencies entrusted with caring for our national forests and parks. The mass firings and funding freezes are more than bureaucratic

changes—they are direct blows to our democracy, the livelihoods of local communities, and the future of our public lands.

In 2024, the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve generated over \$96 million in tourism dollars and helped support more than a thousand local jobs in West Virginia, according to the National Park Service. In 2023,

tourism to Shenandoah National Park contributed \$114 million to the local economy in Virginia. That spending supported 1,351 jobs in the local area and had a cumulative benefit to the local economy of \$156 million. Record visitation at our national forests and state parks is breathing new life into small towns once overshadowed by a century of resource extraction. Our public lands are not just scenic escapes; they are shared resources we hold in trust as an inheritance to be protected and cherished.

Despite these economic and environmental concerns, West Virginia Senators Shelley Moore Capito and Jim Justice voted against two Senate amendments aimed at reinstating these critical federal employees and establishing permanent funding for wildland firefighters on Feb. 20, 2025. The amendments, which failed by a 48-52 vote, would have directly benefited

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# Conservation groups condemn recent mass firings at US Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service

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public lands and the communities that rely on them for economic stability.

## **National Impact and Response**

Beyond West Virginia, the ramifications of these firings are being felt nationwide. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee, the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming are all seeing severe staff shortages, leading to delayed trail maintenance, reduced ranger-led programs, and fewer protections for endangered species.

Environmental organizations across the country, including the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society, have echoed concerns raised by the Conservancy and its partners. Many are calling for urgent congressional hearings to investigate the impact of these mass layoffs on public lands and natural resources.

Recognizing the severity of these cuts, the Conservancy has joined a national sign-on letter urging Congress to immediately reverse these terminations and halt any further reductions to the federal workforce overseeing public lands. This letter, backed by multiple conservation organizations, highlights the devastating effects these indiscriminate workforce reductions will have on environmental protection, public safety, and local economies.

**“Here is your country. Cherish these natural wonders, cherish the natural resources, cherish the history and romance as a sacred heritage, for your children and your children’s children. Do not let selfish men or greedy interests skin your country of its beauty, its riches or its romance.”**

— Theodore Roosevelt, 26th President of the United States

## **Statement by Marilyn Shoenfeld, President, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy and Friends of the 500th:**

“It is with great sadness and mounting frustration that I report the sudden firing of Ecological Services staff at Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge on Friday, February 14. This arbitrary decision, made without notice or plan, further compounds devastating layoffs of our U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service employees. Who will now protect and preserve our public lands—including our wetlands, streams, and unique ecological systems—that keep our water drinkable, our air breathable, and our wildlife safe? We must act now and stand together to put an end to this madness.”

## **Statement by Olivia Miller, Program Director at the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy:**

“We are deeply concerned by this attack on our National Forest system, national parks, and their employees—

and we’re dismayed by the apparent silence from so many of our state’s leaders. Last Friday, hard-working West Virginians who have been working tirelessly to keep our forests healthy and our parks thriving went to work only to discover they were out of a job by day’s end. Where is the dignity in that?

“Our national forests and parks aren’t just scenery—they’re woven into the fabric of who we are as Americans. They provide us all with clean water, clean air, and irreplaceable opportunities for hunting, fishing, hiking, and family recreation. Our Forest Service employees not only protect these natural treasures but also keep our trails well maintained, safeguard wildlife, and ensure that our campgrounds and forests remain free of litter. We are proud to have worked alongside these professionals over the years, many of whom have served on our board. Our missions go hand in hand.”

**Statement from Andrew Young,**

## **Staff Attorney at the Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance:**

“It’s no secret that conservationists and federal land managers don’t always agree on every project. Yet we share a core mission: to safeguard the public interest, protect our treasured landscapes, and preserve our natural heritage for the generations who will follow us. The skilled civil servants now losing their jobs have spent their careers working toward those same ideals—even when we debated the details, our commitment to the land itself was mutual.

“By firing these committed public servants, the administration is clearing the path for corrupt oligarchs and billionaires who view our national forests and parks as a cash grab, not the priceless public treasures they are. These powerful interests thrive on our silence, hoping we’ll be too discouraged or distracted to fight back as this administration floods the zone. But if we stand together—across Appalachia and throughout the country—we can stop the privatization and destruction of the sacred places we hold dear. Our power lies in our unity. When everyday people unite to protect what’s rightfully ours, we can ensure that our national forests, parks, and rivers remain a living legacy for future generations, not a private playground for the ultra-wealthy.”

## Register now for E-Day on March 17!

**Change happens when we show up!** For 35 years, Environmental Day (E-Day) has united advocates to demand stronger environmental protections for West Virginians. Attending isn’t just about networking or displays—it’s about showing up, being seen, and holding legislators accountable for their decisions about our environment, health, and future.

Join us at the WV State Capitol on Monday, March 17, 2025, from 9 a.m. to

2 p.m. to stand with fellow advocates and send a clear message: West Virginians demand strong environmental protections for clean air, safe water, and public lands. Registration is now open.

Did you miss our live webinar? You can now watch the recording of Advocacy 101 – Preparing for E-Day, where we covered the fundamentals of effective advocacy, including why it matters, how to set up meetings with legislators,

and key topics you may wish to discuss. Plus, get the latest legislative updates from WVEC lobbyist Lucia Valentine on what’s been filed and what to expect in Charleston this session.

### **What to Expect at E-Day 2025**

**Presence Matters:** A strong turnout sends a powerful message—West Virginians care about clean air, safe water and public lands.

**Join the Rally:** Stand alongside advocates and lawmakers calling for

change.

**Exhibit & Connect:** Nonprofits, student groups, and advocacy organizations will showcase their work.

**Celebrate Environmental Leadership:** This year, we’re reintroducing awards to recognize emerging advocates and legacy environmental champions who have impacted WV’s environmental movement.

**Meet with Legislators:** Have direct conversations about issues and poli-

# Thoughts from our President

**Dear friends and fellow lovers of the Highlands,**

Over many years as a member of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, I've seen many battles come and go. But I have not witnessed such a sweeping assault on our public lands as we're seeing right now. We need all hands on deck—the threat we anticipated has arrived, and it's not pretty.

You've likely seen the headlines about the sudden firings of dedicated employees at the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, and other public lands agencies. It's heartbreaking to learn that among those dismissed were our biologists, park rangers, search and rescue experts, foresters, and researchers—people who have devoted their careers to safeguarding the treasures of our land. Some lost data in the upheaval; in many cases, their expertise was dismissed without evaluation. Just fired.

According to the Washington Post, U.S. District Judge William Alsup ordered OPM to rescind the firings,

## Register Now for E-Day on March 17!

*Continued from page 2*

cies.

Join the 35th Anniversary Celebration!

The first E-Day occurred on January 22, 1990, when over 450 citizens from across the state gathered at the WV State Capitol to declare the 1990s as the “Decade of the Environment” in WV. The impact was immediate—constituents flooded legislators with their



stating on Feb. 27, 2025, “The Office of Personnel Management does not have any authority whatsoever, under any statute in the history of the universe, to hire and fire employees at another agency....” For now, a three-week stay is in place. We'll see if it holds.

Firing employees is only one impact of the imminent destruction of our public lands system. We've also seen grants for environmental projects canceled, protection standards for land, air, and water rolled back, and the permitting process for mining and drilling fast-tracked. Perhaps the most chilling proposal comes from the House of Representatives, which is considering

changes to how public lands are accounted for—making it easier to sell them off.

Our rivers and mountains are more than just scenic wonders; they're living memories, home to countless species, and vital to our health and heritage. Losing them is a cost we cannot afford to bear.

So, I'm calling on you—our members, supporters, and concerned citizens everywhere—to stand up and speak out. Make those calls. Write those letters and emails. Attend Town Halls when Congress goes into recess on March 15. Share your stories of why our public lands matter. Let our repre-

sentatives know they're being watched and that we expect them to protect our collective future.

Meanwhile, the Conservancy continues moving forward with our spring and summer plans. Our new coloring book—celebrating the Highlands' beauty—is available for purchase on our website. The Dolly Sods Wilderness Stewards are gearing up for a busy season. Our Extractive Industries Committee continues its work on mining-related lawsuits, and we remain committed to defending this place we all love.

But we can't do it alone. We need every voice and every ounce of courage you can muster. Reach out to me at [marilyn.shoenfeld@gmail.com](mailto:marilyn.shoenfeld@gmail.com) if you have ideas, questions, or just need a word of encouragement. Together, we are a mighty force, capable of turning the tide.

See you in the Highlands!

*Marilyn Shoenfeld*  
President

*West Virginia Highlands Conservancy*



concerns, and thanks to statewide media coverage, E-Day became a cornerstone of WVEC's mission.

Since the first E-Day, we've shown that a visible, vocal movement is the key to change. Let's ensure legislators know we are watching, caring, and holding them accountable.

**The best way to make an impact? Show up.**

Please register today to let us know you're coming! Questions? Contact us at [WVECevents@gmail.com](mailto:WVECevents@gmail.com)

Mark your calendar for March 17, 2025. See you at the WV State Capitol!

## 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](http://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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# Environmental groups sue to challenge mountaintop removal mine on Coal River Mountain

*The Plaintiffs Seek a Court Order Vindicating a Previously Approved Clean Water Act Permit*

On Feb. 19, 2025, Coal River Mountain Watch, the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, Appalachian Voices, and Sierra Club filed a lawsuit in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of West Virginia challenging the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' decision to grant a Clean Water Act permit for four valley fills associated with the Turkeyfoot Surface Mine in Raleigh County, West Virginia. The groups are represented by lawyers from Appalachian Mountain Advocates.

Mountaintop removal mining is among the most destructive mining methods, responsible for the decimation of vibrant communities and ecosystems across Appalachia. To extract coal, mountaintop removal mining involves blowing up the tops of mountains and dumping waste, dirt, and rocks – called mining spoil – into adjacent valleys and mountain streams. The mining spoil burying these waterways, called valley fills, discharges pollution that wreaks havoc on aquatic life. Air pollutants are also discharged throughout the mining process, resulting in serious health risks to nearby



communities.

Decades of staunch grassroots organizing and successful legal fights by affected communities have resulted in less frequent mountaintop removal mining proposals. However, despite the consequences, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers continues to issue Clean Water Act permits for large-scale surface mines with numerous valley fills.

Alpha Metallurgical Resources' 1,086-acre Turkeyfoot Surface Mine on Coal River Mountain is one such proposal. The operation's four valley fills authorized by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers would result in the dumping of mining spoil into more than 3.5 miles of local streams. The lawsuit filed

today argues the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers acted arbitrarily and capriciously in issuing the Turkeyfoot section 404 permit.

"The Army Corps of Engineers continues to bet Appalachian communities' health, safety, quality of life, and mountain streams on coal companies' assurance that these valley fills will comply. Decades of pollution and mountains of evidence show this to be a losing bet," said **Vernon Haltom, executive director of Coal River Mountain Watch.**

"The valley fills approved by the Army Corps of Engineers at the Turkeyfoot mine will contaminate our water in perpetuity, irreparably impacting the

lives of area residents for the worse," said **Tyler Cannon, board member of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy.** "We should not have to use the courts to ensure the Corps fulfills their obligation of protecting our water and the health of community members, but we are prepared to hold them to account for granting Alpha this approval."

"Numerous examples from past mining have demonstrated that these valley fills consistently violate Clean Water Act standards," said **Jim Kotcon, chair of the WV Chapter of Sierra Club.** "The Corps is required to protect our water and the local communities that depend on it, and they cannot simply ignore their long record of failure to do so."

"The Army Corps was particularly egregious and ridiculous in their justification for allowing Alpha's valley fills at the Turkeyfoot mine," said **Willie Dodson, coal impacts program manager with Appalachian Voices.** "The Corps has claimed that these valley fills will somehow be totally benign, despite decades of evidence to the contrary. I cannot remember a 404 justification in the past that was so riddled with incorrect statements and unsupported assertions."

## West Virginia legislative session report

*By Luanne McGovern, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy*

The 87th West Virginia Legislature got underway on February 12 with a new Governor, new Senate leadership and new committee processes in the West Virginia House of Representatives. As of our publication date, over 1,500 bills have been introduced, with many more on the way. Needless to say, few of these bills will see the light of day, but there are many troubling issues coming forward. Given the short two-month session, things can move quickly and change overnight.

With all the issues facing us at the state and national levels, your in-



From left to right: Olivia Miller (Program Director, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy), Lucia Valentine (West Virginia Environmental Council lobbyist), Samantha Nygaard (Appalachian Program Manager, National Parks Conservation Association) and Mike Jones (Conservation Manager, West Virginia Rivers Coalition) at the West Virginia State Capitol.

put is more critical than ever. The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy is committed to keeping you updated on important bills through social media, targeted emails and action alerts. Contacting your senators and delegates personally is the most effective way to ensure they know how you feel about various legislative bills. Find out how to contact your representatives at [wvhighlands.org](http://wvhighlands.org)

West Virginia has a surprising number of news and social media sources that can keep you updated on what is happening in the West Virginia

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# Coal company's bankruptcy filing reflects growing pressure to end reckless mining in West Virginia

On Feb. 7, 2025, South Fork Coal Company and its parent entities Xinergergy and White Forest Resources, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in Delaware. The move follows the company's well-documented pattern of water pollution and mine clean-up violations, which have drawn mounting public scrutiny and legal actions. In January, the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement issued a cessation order, shutting down a haul road and associated coal removal at the Rocky Run Surface Mine for 11 days. The company's mines are also implicated in three lawsuits brought by community and conservation organizations over a long list of environmental violations.

The bankruptcy results in a stay of a lawsuit brought by West Virginia Highlands Conservancy and Appalachian Voices over dozens of incidents of water pollution and violations of reclamation standards at South Fork Coal's mines in the Cherry River headwaters of Greenbrier County, just upstream of the community of Richwood.

For coal companies, bankruptcy is often a calculated maneuver by out-of-state investors to separate profitable assets from the burdens of environmental liabilities and obligations to workers. This corporate maneuver is part of a longstanding pattern of wealthy outsiders exploiting West Virginia's people and resources for personal gain. In doing so, out-of-state investors aim to shed their responsibilities to West Virginia's people and land while preserving the more lucrative parts of the enterprise.

South Fork Coal Company operates on more than 4,000 acres at the headwaters of the Cherry River in Nicholas, Greenbrier, and Pocahontas counties — a major tributary of the Gauley River and a world-class recreation destination. Their strip mines lie just six miles from the Cranberry Glades Wilderness Area, West Virginia's largest wilderness and two miles from the Falls of Hills Creek Scenic Area.

**Statement by Willie Dodson, coal**



*Rocky Run Surface Mine in Greenbrier County, West Virginia. Photo courtesy of Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance*

## **impacts program coordinator for Appalachian Voices:**

“South Fork Coal Company violated the Clean Water Act at least 82 times since 2020, according to the company's own data. By declaring bankruptcy, the company has effectively shielded itself, for now, from our lawsuit seeking to enforce these violations. The West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, on the other hand, retains full authority to force this company to comply with environmental laws, and to shut down their operations if they fail to do so. Appalachian Voices will continue to monitor these mines and educate our members and community partners about South Fork Coal's impacts on the Cherry River. In the meanwhile, the DEP must be relentless in monitoring this company's operations, enforcing the law and protecting the pristine Cherry/Gauley River headwaters where South Fork Coal Company wants to keep mining, even though it is bankrupt.”

**Statement by Andrew Young, staff attorney for the Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance:**

“We are at the forefront of a new chapter in a long class war — a fight for justice, dignity and the future of our communities. This bankruptcy filing is emblematic of our ongoing struggle to ensure West Virginia is governed by fairness and accountability, not by corporate greed. South Fork Coal's Chapter 11 filing is yet more evidence that the coal industry in West Virginia is unsustainable. A common maneuver here is to split the business into a ‘good’ side, safeguarding profitable assets for wealthy out-of-state investors, and a ‘bad’ side, saddling West Virginians with toxic liabilities and abandoned promises. If that happens here, it will be the latest blow in this age-old struggle, where billionaires and outside financiers exploit the land, the people and their labor — then cut and run when called to account.”

**Statement by Olivia Miller, program director for the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy:**

“Coal companies have long disrespected the people and the land of West Virginia, doing everything they can to avoid taking responsibility for the

damage they've done. And what's even worse is how our so-called leaders in this state continue to worship at these companies' feet instead of boldly taking on the challenge of creating a new and better future. This is just the latest chapter in a long, shameful legacy of wealthy outsiders draining Appalachia dry, then using bankruptcy as a shield from liability. For decades, shareholders have pocketed massive profits while leaving behind polluted rivers, struggling communities, bereaved families and fractured local economies. Real prosperity doesn't come from extraction and abandonment; it comes from building an economy that values West Virginian's well-being, our environment and the resilience of local communities. Together, we can and will forge a future that values people and places over profits.”

**Statement by Tyler Cannon, board member for the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy:**

“With bankruptcy on the horizon, a window is opening for us to speak out about what we need this watershed to look like for future generations. When companies like South Fork Coal Company or their shadowy investors pull out of here, it's West Virginians that are left behind with the company's mess. Those same investors can restructure, pick a new name, and continue with the same practices that caused this business to fail. Where is the justice in that? True prosperity and job creation in West Virginia can't be built on a foundation of pollution, worker exploitation, black lung, and abandoned promises. As corporate leaders attempt to shield themselves from the consequences of their choices, we call on everyone — workers, residents, and elected officials — to stand together. We can and must create a future that uplifts communities, safeguards the environment and ends the cycle of extraction that has long defined the Appalachian coalfields.”

## West Virginia legislative session report continued from page 5

Legislature. The Conservancy has been a member of the West Virginia Environmental Council ([www.wvecouncil.org](http://www.wvecouncil.org)) for many years and partner with numerous organizations to fight for our state's environment and public lands.

News outlets: WV Gazette Mail, MetroNews, Mountain State Spotlight, Country Roads News (Tucker County) The Real WV to name a few.

Social Media: The Conservancy, WV Environmental Council, WV Rivers, WV for Public Lands, Mountain Mamas, WV Citizen Action Group and many more!

Since we are only a couple of weeks into the session, it is difficult to predict which bills will rise to the surface. But there are a few bills we are already tracking, many of which have been recycled from last year. It seems that no bad idea ever really goes away.

Timbering in public lands – SB224 is back and would allow timbering in state parks and forests for “wildfire” protection. This ill-advised initiative passed the Senate last year but was stopped in the House.

Rolling back green energy initiatives – A plethora of bills have been introduced to dis-incentivize solar and wind energy in the state. SB439 (removing property tax exemptions for wind turbines) has advanced out of the Sen-

ate Energy, Industry and Mining Committee and may have legs. Other bills attacking green energy include HB 2471, HB 2568, SB57, SB505 and SB510.

Community air monitoring – SB575 is back around this year. The desire for citizen activists to understand what is in the air they breathe has led manufacturers to again sponsor this bill. It would eliminate the ability of citizens to use air monitoring data that they collect in actions against polluters.

Carbon credits – Multiple bills have again been introduced this year (SB107, 227, 281) to give the state control over carbon credit programs and limit landowner's rights to engage in third party contracts concerning their forest lands.

Changing rules around above ground storage tanks – it's back! SB592 would again try to loosen rules around storage tanks that could directly impact our drinking water systems.

Community solar - SB34 and HB2419 have been introduced by Senator Oliverio and Delegates Hansen and Young. This is at least the third year that this valuable program has been brought forward to help West Virginians manage ever increasing power bills. It is unlikely to advance, given the overwhelming power of the coal and natural gas lobby.

## Book Review: *Crossings: How Road Ecology Is Shaping the Future of Our Planet* by Ben Goldfarb

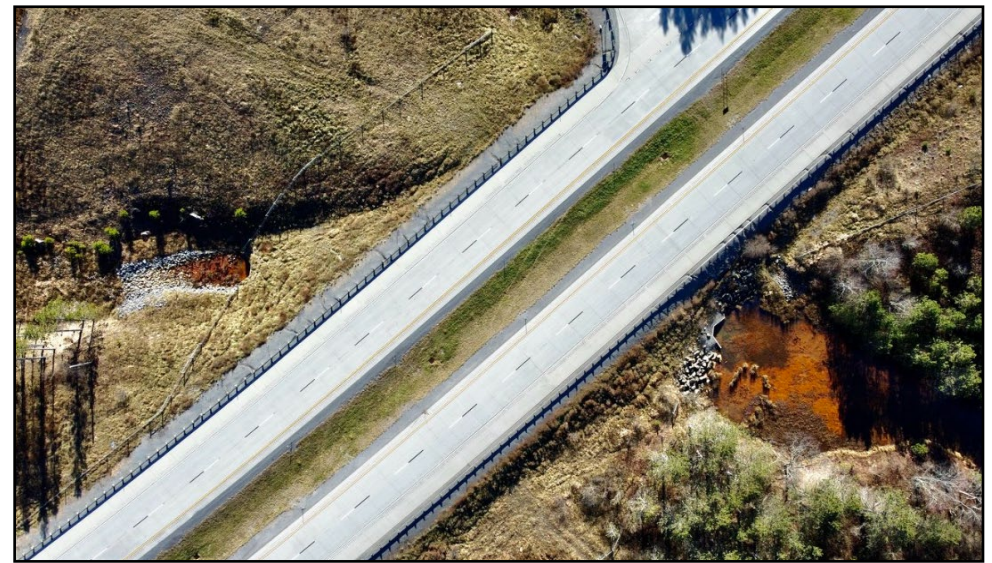
Reviewed by John McFerrin

This is a book about roadkill. Three hundred pages about roadkill may not sound enticing but it really is an entertaining and informative book.

The subject is road ecology, how the building of roads affects the places where roads are located. There is one long and interesting chapter about how the

placement of roads affects cities and the people and neighborhoods where the road is located. Other than that, it is all about roadkill. Roadkill is the result when the built environment of roads comes in contact with the animal world. It is through roadkill that the result of that contact become apparent.

There are an amazing num-



A birds eye view of Corridor H outside of Davis by Frank Gebhard.

ber of roads in this country and, for that matter, the world. They range from small (but numerous) logging roads to multilane highways. Every one of them has an impact on the world through which they run. The impact becomes most obvious to humans when they see dead animals on the road but the impacts do not stop there. Bird songs are different close to roads as birds adjust to the noise. Animal populations lose genetic diversity when roads imprison them on what are effectively islands.

Roadkill seems an unlikely field of study. In spite of this, there is much that is known. Roadkill increases in proportion to traffic but only until traffic reaches a certain point. At that point, roadkill drops off because—when traffic is above a certain level—animals won't even try to cross. The exception is young males who, like adolescents everywhere, will try anything. Daylight savings time can increase road kill when it moves rush hour to dusk, when many species are most active. There

is data on roadkill among Giant Anteaters in Brazil and Howler Monkeys in Southeast Asia.

The book is not just a catalogue of roadkill around the world. It is a book of solutions as well. The primary solution is crossings, either bridges over roads or tunnels underneath them. With the discussions of crossings are discussions of the problems—technical, financial, and political—of installing crossings. Animals whose defensive strategy is to run from danger will not use a tunnel. Being confined that way is anathema to their carefully evolved survival strategy. They have to have a bridge, where they can constantly survey the horizon for danger. Most animals will not enter a tunnel unless there is visible light from the other end. For Howler Monkeys neither bridges nor tunnels will work. They need a system of ropes to cross the gap in the canopy.

The politics of roadkill are just what one might expect: money for roads is always con-

*Continued on page 9*

# Federal regulators shut down illegal WV coal haul road—Interior quietly reopens it at company's request

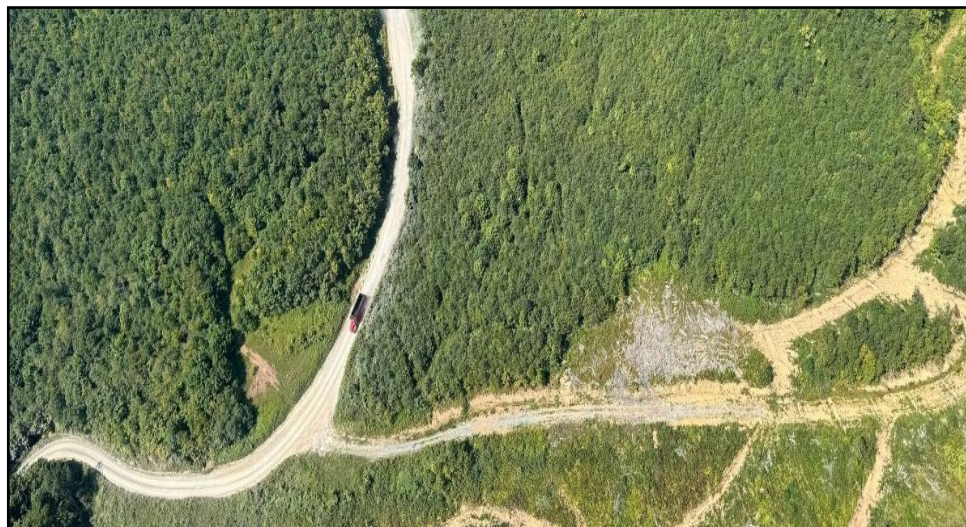
By Olivia Miller, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

In a whirlwind of conflicting decisions, the U.S. Department of the Interior has quietly allowed South Fork Coal Company to resume hauling coal through the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia—just weeks after Biden administration regulators shut down the unlawful haul road.

Haulroad #2, snaking 1.2 miles through the steep and sacred Monongahela National Forest, is the only transport route linking the company's 1,200-acre Rocky Run Surface Mine to its Clearco coal processing facility. The closure of Haulroad #2 would safeguard some of our most cherished public lands and critical habitats for native species like the brook trout from the impacts of South Fork Coal's operations.

On January 13, the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement issued a cessation order to South Fork Coal Company, barring it from using Haulroad #2 to transport coal until it could prove valid legal rights to operate on national forest land—a requirement of federal law. The order followed complaints filed throughout the summer of 2024 by a coalition of conservation organizations, including the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance, and Appalachian Voices, and a letter signed by 11 grassroots organizations asking Sharon Buccino, who headed the OSMRE under President Biden, to take decisive enforcement action.

Though Buccino's OSMRE did the right thing, justice was short-lived. Unbeknownst to the groups that spurred the enforcement action, South Fork Coal Company swiftly appealed the cessation order to an administrative appeals board. Then, on or around January 27—after the keys to federal agencies



had been handed over to the incoming Trump administration—the DOI's Office of Hearings and Appeals granted the company's request to reopen the road without informing the public or the very organizations that had brought the violations to light.

"This reversal is a textbook example of regulatory capture," said Andrew Young, staff attorney for the Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance. "The agency itself admitted that this road should not be used for unlawful coal hauling across the national forest. We compelled OSMRE to act—and then, behind closed doors, they apparently caved to industry pressure. We won't let this stand."

Conservation groups only learned about the closure on January 31, and about the hearing on February 3—long after the process was underway and a temporary stay of the cessation order was granted.

"Reopening the road behind closed doors raises serious concerns and is a stark reminder that 'King Coal' still wields its power in the shadows," said Young. "By overruling its own enforcement agency, DOI raises pressing questions about industry influence and whether the agency is prepared to ignore federal law when the coal companies come calling."

"Why were the parties who demanded enforcement action in the first place locked out of this process? Why wasn't the public informed," Young added. "And why did the agency solicitor appear to stand aside as South Fork Coal Company argued for a green light to flout the law?"

For years, South Fork Coal Company has piled up environmental violations, yet regulatory agencies have repeatedly failed to enforce the law. In addition to operating an unlawfully permitted coal haul road in the national forest, South Fork's mines have caused scores of violations of the Clean Water Act in recent years, as detailed in a lawsuit filed by conservation groups in December 2024. We are also challenging the U.S. Forest Service's issuance of a commercial road-use permit to South Fork Coal Company because the agency failed to complete the required NEPA analysis or Endangered Species Act consultation before authorizing industrial scale coal hauling through the forest. The company's operations also lack required protection and enhancement plans for the endangered candy darter, in violation of the Endangered Species Act—violations that are implicated in yet another lawsuit filed by Appalachian Voices and the Center for Bi-

ological Diversity against the OSMRE.

South Fork Coal Company currently operates on more than 4,000 acres at the headwaters of the Cherry River—a major tributary of the Gauley River and a world-class recreation destination. Their strip mines lie just six miles from the Cranberry Glades Wilderness Area, West Virginia's largest Wilderness, and two miles from the Falls of Hills Creek Scenic Area.

"South Fork Coal is a known bad actor," said Willie Dodson, coal impacts program manager for Appalachian Voices. "According to the company's own data, its mines have polluted the Cherry River upstream of the drinking water intake for the town of Richwood. The company has run roughshod over numerous regulations to the detriment of the Cherry River, the Gauley further downstream, and the Monongahela. These are the precise natural resources that the local economy depends on now, and that local communities will continue to depend on long after South Fork Coal is done and gone. This unlawfully permitted haul road is just one among many shortcuts taken by South Fork Coal Company, yet instead of enforcing the law, the Department of the Interior is letting them off the hook."

We are deeply disappointed, though admittedly not surprised. West Virginians have a proud legacy of standing up to outside profiteers who exploit our mountains and communities. Yet the power to defend these cherished places ultimately rests with an informed, energized public—people who refuse to be silenced by King Coal. While we press our case in the courts and with regulators, this fight demands a nationwide wave of support to protect our public lands. Whether by raising your voice in your hometown or sharing the facts that empower others, your

*Continued on page 9*



**Federal regulators shut down illegal WV coal haul road—Interior quietly reopens it at company’s request**

*Continued from page 8*

involvement is essential. Our mountains, people, and future hang in the balance.

We forced one shutdown of the haul road, proving that our advocacy works. There’s no guaranteed path ahead, but with your help, we can and will push for a permanent closure. If federal agencies fail to uphold the laws they are sworn to enforce, secret deals and corporate influence will continue to chip away at important public lands protections. This struggle reaches well beyond West Virginia, reminding us that when one national forest is at risk, all are threatened. Join us—help safeguard the Monongahela National Forest, and together, we can protect America’s natural heritage for generations to come.

While writing this story, we learned of a new development: on Feb. 7, 2025, South Fork Coal Company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. For the latest developments on the bankruptcy filing and its potential impacts, please refer to the ongoing article on page 6.

**Book Review: Crossings: How Road Ecology Is Shaping the Future of Our Planet by Ben Goldfarb**

*Continued from page 7*

tentious. There is always a question of whether money goes for pavement or animal bridges is ever present.

The economics of roadkill can be quantified. It is known how much property damage results from collisions with animals. With this knowledge, it is possible to calculate how long it would take for the cost of damage avoided to pay for an animal bridge or tunnel. Performing such calculations reveals that the damage avoided usually equals the cost of a bridge or tunnel in a surprisingly short time.

In addition to all the facts

and insights into how road affect the natural world, the book offers a change in perspective. The customary way of thinking of roads is that they are a human convenience, built for the benefit of humans. The needs of animals are secondary, if they are thought of at all.

This book offers a more balanced view. Roads are an intrusion into space occupied by animals. Humans, and their roads, are sharing the space with the animals who already live there. It is not that animals are crossing our road but that our road is crossing their forest. As fellow occupants of the space, it is only fair that the interests of the animals be taken into account. Considered this way, the question of whether we should build bridges for deer or tunnels for toads becomes obvious. Why wouldn’t we do that?

**Contact your representatives and make your voice heard!**

**We’ve added a new page to our website where you can find contact details for state and federal representatives at**

**[wvhighlands.org/contact-your-representatives](http://wvhighlands.org/contact-your-representatives). The West Virginia Legislature’s interim session is set for Feb. 10-11, with the 2025 regular session starting on Feb. 12.**

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

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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](http://www.wvhighlands.org)

# Trump's energy emergency declaration of war on America

By Tyson Slocum, Public Citizen

President Donald Trump's unconstitutional blitzkrieg on congressionally-mandated agencies has been slightly stymied, for now, in part by Public Citizen's litigation challenges to the dissolution of USAID and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau; we've stopped grabs of our personal information at Treasury and the Department of Education; and we're challenging the removal of critical health information at CDC, FDA, among other ongoing attacks.

But Trump's January 20 declaration of an energy emergency is the underreported threat, as the executive order sets into motion the maniacal politicization of national security as a means to dismantle generations of public health and safety laws in order to promote coal, natural gas and oil. It also entails a brazen attack on the leadership and clean energy priorities of Americans living in the most populous regions of our nation, forcing America's working families to pay more for energy.

It may seem absurd that, at a time when no country in the history of the world produces more oil and natural gas every day than the United States, that there would somehow be an energy emergency. But when radical,



unhinged fossil fuel executives have the ear of the President, they see this fraudulent emergency declaration as their opportunity to destroy progress of wind and solar development, and maximize fossil fuel exports that increasingly dictate whether their fracking operations are profitable or not.

Trump 2.0 is all about wrathful vengeance and legal disorder, and the energy emergency avowal—issued in the first hours of his presidency, signaling its importance—lays out a diabolical blueprint of his spiteful approach: it falsely claims the rise of wind and solar (referenced as “intermittent”) has “driven our Nation into a national emergency.” Without any factual citation, the order continues its outrageous fabrications: “These numerous prob-

lems are most pronounced in our Nation's Northeast and West Coast, where dangerous State and local policies jeopardize our Nation's core national defense and security needs, and devastate the prosperity of not only local residents but the entire United States population.” New York State's fracking ban, New England's renewable energy mandates and California's climate laws now all harm national security under Trump's sweeping decree: he has declared energy civil war against the states and citizens that voted for his political opponent. Even though Trump has made it pretty clear he has his various, bizarre issues with wind and solar, he's not going to use any of these emergency powers to disrupt the record renewables being deployed in Texas, or

interfere with wind in the GOP farm belt. No – his energy emergency is designed to mischaracterize the heart of the Democratic campaign and policy agenda of combating climate change and promoting renewables as dangerous to America's national security. The energy emergency will be used as an electoral cudgel to denigrate Democratic credibility on energy prices and energy security, no matter that the facts demonstrate the exact opposite.

Trump's assault is not bluster—let's walk through the executive order. First we start with Section 8, which defines which energy resources will qualify for emergency assistance. Every energy source is listed except wind, solar, battery storage and energy efficiency. Fossil fuels are literally the primary recipients of any emergency aid. Trump's swap of “all of the above” for “energy dominance” rhetoric is deliberate: Trump seeks to promote fossil fuels as “dominant” and characterize renewables as “weak.” All of the above is simply too inclusive for Trump's war on renewables. He's already stopped all renewable energy development for offshore federal waters. Indeed, Trump's new National Energy Dominance Council relies on the same classifications as the January 20 energy emergency order

*Continued on page 12*

## Leave a legacy of hope for the future

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

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 [crys.bauer@wvhighlands.org](mailto:crys.bauer@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.



Staying informed with our action alerts will empower you to advocate for environmental policies that matter the most. **Sign up today at [bit.ly/WVHCemailsignup](https://bit.ly/WVHCemailsignup)**

## Abandoned Mine Land cleanup disrupted by federal funding freeze

By Dan Radmacher, *Appalachian Voices*

As the Appalachian region is experiencing intense rainfall this week, the federal Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement is not processing state requests seeking approval for abandoned mine land reclamation projects according to state agency officials and congressional staff. This is part of an ongoing federal funding freeze that is defying court orders. State offices of mine reclamation are not able to access funds or get authorizations to proceed with reclamation projects because the funds were provided in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and the federal agency is still freezing funds provided through the 2022 law.

Heavy rainfall and thawing ground as temperatures warm often lead to new or worsened AML problems, such as subsidence and landslides.

**Statement by Matt Hepler, Environmental Scientist for Appalachian Voices:**

“Abandoned mine land projects are essential for improving community safety, creating jobs and addressing decades of pollution. These efforts not only restore the environment but also provide critical economic support to affected areas. The decision to freeze funding at such a crucial time raises serious concerns, as it jeopardizes ongoing remediation work.”

**Statement by Chelsea Barnes, Director of Government Affairs and Strategy:**

“The Abandoned Mine Land Program has broad bipartisan support, with a decades-long record of creating jobs and improving safety for the



millions of people who live near abandoned coal mines. We urge Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum and the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement to restart the crucial Abandoned Mine Land Program immediately.”

### Background:

Abandoned mine lands are coal mining sites that were mined prior to Congress’ 1977 passage of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act. Before that law, coal companies were not required to remediate damaged land and water after mining to protect nearby communities, a process known as reclamation. To reclaim the thousands of pre-1977 mine sites, the law set up the Abandoned Mine Land Reclamation Program where current coal companies pay a fee per ton of coal mined to support cleanup of the industry’s decades-old abandoned sites.

The 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law extended the AML fee on coal mined and also infused \$11.2 billion in the fund to address a significant backlog of abandoned mine lands in need of reclamation. State and Tribal governments use this funding to hire local contractors to address environmental and safety hazards at abandoned mine land sites.

## Take Action to Protect Community Air Monitoring

By Morgan King, *WV CAG Climate and Energy Program Manager*

A new bill threatens to silence citizen science. SB 575 would limit community air monitoring by invalidating data collected by local air sensors and threaten our democracy through legislative overreach. Most problematically, the bill prevents the judiciary from deciding whether or not data is valid, thus violating the expertise and powers of the judicial branch of government.

Community air monitoring plays a crucial role in engaging citizens and supplementing data gathered by government agencies including, the EPA and the DEP. Our grassroots approach to monitoring air quality empowers citizens with free-to-them sensors to measure particulate matter and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in their air. Our project uses PurpleAir monitors that share AQI data on a real-time map and sends text alerts when local AQI levels are unsafe.

This map and the data we gather are also used to fill in gaps in the DEP’s and EPA’s monitoring network, as evidenced by the use of PurpleAir data in EPA maps and tools, and was recently apparent during the wildfire season of 2023.

Now, industry lobbyists want to suppress progress on this community science project. The government should not waste resources on policing community monitoring programs that provide peace of mind to local citizens and a vetted supplement to the EPA’s data.

Contact members of the Senate Government Organization and tell them that you want to be able to monitor your air to protect your health!



Gary Zuckett, *WV CAG Co-Director*, installs a PurpleAir monitor at the CAG office in Charleston, WV.

If you would like to call your representatives, you can use the following sample script:

**Hi, my name is [Your Name] and I’m calling from [Your City], [Your State]. I’m calling to ask you to oppose SB 575 because it threatens community air monitoring. This bill would make it harder for people to track local air quality, even though our data helps fill gaps in government monitoring and keeps communities informed—especially during events like wildfires. Blocking this information doesn’t protect the public; it just keeps people in the dark. Please vote no on SB 575 and stand up for clean air and public health. Thank you for your time and consideration!**

*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.*

# Trump's energy emergency declaration of war on America

*Continued from page 10*

to promote fossil fuels at the expense of renewables.

Section 2 directs any federal agency seeking to utilize energy emergency powers to first “submit recommendations for a course of action to the President, through the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.” Thus the administration will claim that all energy emergency actions are rooted in national security rationales.

The U.S. military has bases in all 50 states, all of which are interconnected to local utilities. Section 7 directs the military to dictate aspects of U.S. civilian energy infrastructure: “In collaboration with the Secretaries of Interior and Energy, the Secretary of Defense shall conduct an assessment of the Department of Defense’s ability to acquire and transport the energy, electricity, or fuels needed to protect the homeland and to conduct operations abroad, and, within 60 days, shall submit this assessment to the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.” It then cites 10 U.S.C. § 2808, which grants the military sweeping powers—“without regard to any other provision of law”—to build anything it wants in the event of a “declaration by the President of a national emergency.”

New York State opposes a natural gas pipeline? Trump can now order the U.S. military to seize the land and build anyway—while delegating the construction to whatever fossil fuel company wants it.

Congressionally mandated oil lease sales in Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge attracted zero bids because they’re uneconomic? Trump’s order triggers use of the Defense Production Act to provide taxpayer subsidies to transform uneconomic arctic leases into profitable ones.

Exporting Liquefied Natural Gas first requires a federal government determination that the exports must be “consistent with the public interest”? Trump’s energy emergency declaration determines that unfettered fossil fuel exports are essential for America’s na-

tional security interests, and therefore not only are increased LNG exports in the public interest, but any impediment to producing more methane or transporting methane via pipeline for export are now essential for national security. Indeed, Trump’s new Interior Secretary issued a companion directive declaring his agency will “identify all emergency and legal authorities available to facilitate the identification, permitting, leasing, development, production, transportation, refining, distribution, exporting and generation of domestic energy resources and critical minerals,” transforming America’s federal lands and offshore waters into nothing more than staging grounds for increased fossil fuel exploitation and export overseas.

The Secretary of Defense can produce a classified report claiming that the rise of wind and solar hampers troop readiness, and can therefore declare the regional power grid to be compromising national security in order to justify emergency bailouts of natural gas and coal baseload power plants under Section 202c of the Federal Power Act or other authorities. Indeed, Trump’s Energy Secretary Chris Wright (a former fracking executive) just ordered that his agency “will bring a renewed focus to growing baseload and dispatchable generation.”

If some of this rings familiar, that’s because Trump attempted a variety of energy emergency/national security efforts to boost coal during his first administration, which I fastidiously described here. Trump’s efforts last time were haphazard and faced internal pushback. He is avoiding those mistakes this time, first by declaring the energy emergency within hours of taking office, and second by decimating opposition within agencies. He firmly controls the National Security Council—even installing his Interior Secretary as a member for the first time in American history. On May 29, 2018, Trump’s then-Energy Secretary Rick Perry asked the National Security Council to determine the national security implications of “premature



*Rocky Run Surface Mine in Greenbrier County, West Virginia. Photo courtesy of Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance*

retirements of coal and nuclear power plants. Weeks later, FERC’s then chief of staff Anthony Pugliese outlined collaboration between FERC, the Department of Defense, DOE and the National Security Council to identify the baseload power plants critical to ensuring that military bases, hospitals and other infrastructure can maintain operations in a disaster. At the same time, Perry’s team drafted a memo suggesting a strategy by which DOE would require RTOs to buy energy from certain coal, nuclear and other baseload generation pursuant to 202(c) of the Federal Power Act, combined with the Defense Production Act’s contracting authorities.

And yes, while FERC rejected another Rick-Perry-requested emergency intervention on behalf of coal baseload power in January 2018, it was because two of the largest owners of coal power plants at the time (Dynergy and NRG) argued that the bailout would ruin the competitive markets that allowed their non-coal power fleets to earn tons of profits. In addition, the most powerful lobbying voice of the fossil fuel industry, the American Petroleum Institute, also opposed the bailout because it excluded natural gas. This time around,

Trump made sure that the only fuels he was excluding were wind and solar: all fossil fuels are defined as beneficiaries of energy emergency actions.

The Congressional Research Service recently concluded that a Presidential emergency declaration “is largely determined by the President himself,” with an expectation that the President will act in the interest of the American people. But under Trump’s deranged social media declaration that “He who saves his Country does not violate any Law”, it is not reasonable to assume good intentions.

So what is to be done? Here are Public Citizen’s recommendations:

Northeast and West Coast states fight back. Defend your policies and attack Trump’s outrageous, unpatriotic and unlawful assault on American states.

As Trump’s agencies begin rolling out their reports and recommended actions to impose draconian emergency actions that usurp state sovereignty, work with Public Citizen and other advocates to identify parties that can legally challenge these outrageous attempts to push fossil fuel expansion.

# Remembering George E. Beetham, Jr.

By Cynthia Ellis

We were saddened to learn, in late January, of the death of George E. Beetham, Jr., Director Emeritus of our Board of Directors. That designation, “emeritus”, is indicative of how much George wanted to continue his participation in our work, and of our gratitude for his continuation.

A newspaper editor and dedicated hiker in the West Virginia mountains, George was broadly familiar with the highlands.

The finely crafted family obituary for him noted, “George enjoyed traveling and was an avid backpacker, with a particular affinity for the wilderness areas of West Virginia. His travels inspired him to become an advocate for land preservation. He brought the beauty of the trails to others through his writing, rich with metaphor and vivid detail, and beautiful photography. He became a board member of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy and sometimes wrote columns for their newsletter.”

One of his hiking companions was our own Peter Shoenfeld. Peter’s

wife Marilyn remembers their after-hike dinners at home; George made a lively and witty guest. When invited to join the Conservancy’s board, George met then-president Frank Young. These were the early years of controversy regarding wind power on the ridgetops. George wrote, “I did a map study showing that if the development were moved north by a little more than a mile, intervening knobs higher than the towers might obscure it from Bear Rocks. It would also move it away from Stack Rock. Now, 16 years after the newspaper notice, some of the land we saved has been donated to the West Virginia Nature Conservancy.”

Titles of some of his articles for The Highlands Voice showed his passion: “The Highlands Conservancy’s Contributions to Wilderness” (2017) and “Now We Need to Work to Keep It Wilderness” (2018). Our tributes to Peter Shoenfeld and Frank Young were written by George Beetham.

In comments to his family, Buff Rodman said, **“I knew him from the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy where he made a terrific impact. I en-**



**joyed sharing stories with him when we weren’t busy with Conservancy business. Lots of laughing and trying to outdo each other with tales of our adventures. We shared a love of geology and photography as well.”**

Veteran general member Frank O’Hara shared, **“I remember his writ-**

**ings in the WVHC newsletter, he kept us informed. He had wit and humor. I think he grounded us.”**

Additionally, Hugh Rogers and I, when reminiscing, found we both knew that George loved the skewering humor of the “Pogo” comic strips.

That zest for fun was in addition to his appreciation for natural beauty. He wrote this poem:

*Wisps of clouds ride on the wind  
Scatter and then assemble again  
Storm on the mountain rain for  
the land  
Water to nourish both creature  
and plant  
Sun fills the sky over the plain  
Vapor then rises to form clouds  
again*

[Copyright 2020 by George E. Beetham Jr.; reprinted by permission]

It was a pleasure to serve with, and to know, George Beetham. We, and the mountains, appreciated his help.

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Introductory	\$15		
Other	\$15		
Regular	\$25	\$35	\$50
Associate	\$50	\$75	\$100
Sustaining	\$100	\$150	\$200
Patron	\$250	\$500	\$500
Mountaineer	\$500	\$750	\$1000

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 You may also join online at [www.wvhighlands.org](http://www.wvhighlands.org)

# Wildfire control in West Virginia: past, present and future

By Robert Beanblossom, *Cradle of Forestry in America*

West Virginia faces many serious environmental issues. Water pollution, strip mining, threats to public lands, air pollution, forever chemicals and many others clamor for our concern and attention. However, overriding all others is climate change.

It is paradoxical and unfortunate, however, that one of the most harmful and destructive threats has been overlooked, particularly now when that very threat is increased by a rapidly changing climate. I am speaking of the danger posed by wildfires.

The responsibility for protecting the forests of West Virginia has been relegated to the Division of Forestry but the agency has always been underfunded. Due to this, it is unable to meet expected mandates and is only able to perform what is little more than a token effort.

Why is the Division of Forestry so poorly equipped to cope with the problem in an era when wildfire control in the rest of the nation has become highly sophisticated and mechanized? Why is it that when I left that agency close to fifty years ago because I grew tired of having nothing to work with, it has even less today?

The simple answer for this enigma is the lack of political will to assign priority to wildfire control commensurate with the destructive impact which uncontrolled wildfires have on our environment. But it is a far more complex issue and one that has been created over time by the influence of coal on our socioeconomic and political structure.

Although forests throughout West Virginia are vulnerable to wildfires, the problem has historically been confined to southern West Virginia and developed there largely for the following reasons.

About the turn of the 20th century, land was cheaply acquired by out-of-state coal and land companies. These large companies were only interested in and focused solely on extracting



their mineral wealth and cared little for what happened to the surface. Over the years, they have made only minimal efforts to prevent wildfires because they knew their profits were safely tucked underground. Dependence on coal company leases diminished locals' incentive to protect the land. Having no direct ownership of the land resulted in a lack of a "land ethic" developing among the residents of southern West Virginia.

Along with a lack of appreciation for the land, there is widespread poverty, high dropout rates and high unemployment. All of which indirectly contributes to the wildfire problem because if people fail to acquire fundamental educational skills, it is impossible for them to assimilate scientific concepts about forest management and fire protection. Not only does this phenomenon manifest itself in environmental problems, but it carries over into other aspects of daily life and is no doubt a contributing factor in the widespread, chronic drug problems that exist today in southern West Virginia.

The coal industry has always been characterized by a hostile "us against them" mentality. One of the best examples of the callousness and indifference on the part of the coal industry was the Buffalo Creek disaster. Feb. 26, 1972, a poorly constructed and maintained coal slurry dam in Logan County

gave way killing 125 individuals, many of them women and children, and destroying over a thousand homes. Pittston Coal Corporation, who owned the make-shift dam, was quick to declare it "an act of God."

Thousands of miners have either been killed or maimed in mining accidents. Each one was a result of a violation of federal or state health and safety law by these companies. Many more suffer from black lung disease. In no other industry is the division of management and labor so great, and this attitude carried over into the realm of land management.

The prevailing attitude of the local population has been, "It's the coal company's property, let them worry about it." Striking back at these companies by deliberately setting wildfires was a frequent practice.

Religion has also been a strong contributor to perpetuating many of the social and economic ills in Appalachia, especially southern West Virginia. Strict fundamentalist religion perpetuated the concept of fatalism and instilled the belief that one cannot change their lot in life, especially in rural illiterate mountaineers. This attitude was first introduced by company paid ministers at the beginning of the 20th century to quell union organizers and has been carried forward ever since.

Because of this unique land ownership pattern, there has been no catalyst for change in southern West Virginia. There is no middle class to push for and institute reforms to bring about positive incremental changes in social norms. This has manifested itself in two ways.

First, it is widely believed that the landowning class has often been responsible for social and historical changes taking place in any given area. Naturally, with large absentee landownerships that opportunity never existed in southern West Virginia.

Second, what middle class there is - store owners, professionals, etc. - seem to be quite content to maintain things as they exist. In Harry Caudill's book, *Watches of the Night*, Caudill lamented upon this fact in east Kentucky. He stated of teachers, "Many locals went away to colleges located for the most part in the Appalachian plateau and learned to teach little more than the status quo."

Our political system is also a result of this situation of landownership patterns and coal company dominance and remains committed to maintaining the status quo. Political corruption is quite common; with Mingo County being the latest example.

The county commissioner, the county judge and other officials were sentenced to prison for various crimes just a few years ago. It will be just a matter of time before federal prosecutors' step in again to bust another corrupt political machine. In years past it has happened in Logan County, Lincoln County and other places. No doubt it will happen once again somewhere in southern West Virginia.

Therefore, the Division of Forestry has always struggled due to this lack of interest from residents, large landowners and the political structure at both the state and local level. The Division of Forestry is incapable of handling a catastrophic fire situation especially during extreme drought years because it simply does not possess the

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# Coal River Mountain Watch seeks “good running vehicle”

By Kentucky Sierra Club

Coal River Mountain Watch (CRMW), based in the heart of the West Virginia coalfields - Whitesville, West Virginia in Boone County - is a very lean, boot-strap organization that has been fighting for a clean, just energy future for America for many years. This is a true grassroots organization, their hearts are in the mountains, and the mountain above their little town is being blown apart for coal. CRMW's Judy Bonds won a Goldman Prize for her work fighting mountaintop removal.

Coal River Mountain Watch has been documenting the destruction of their mountains with an innovative drone video program, operated for years by CRMW's amazing Junior Walk, author of the new book “Walk, On the Mountain - Not a Manifesto.”

You can see Junior's videos here: <https://www.youtube.com/@StopMTR/videos>

Right now, Coal River Mountain Watch is asking the public - anyone who cares about the mountains - for a little help. They need a “good running, rugged, reliable” vehicle to travel the West Virginia mountains - some rough and gravel roads - safely. 4WD would



*Junior Walk protects our community by monitoring coal operations for pollution events and violations, by drone and on the ground.*

be ideal.

Junior Walk writes: “For over a quarter century, we at Coal River Mountain Watch have done everything within our power to stop coal companies from pillaging our region with their surface mining practices... We

have been able to cost Lexington Coal Company, who operates the Twilight surface mine complex in Boone and Raleigh Counties (West Virginia) over three million dollars in fines...

“Our mountain monitoring vehicle, a 2000 Ford Ranger with a whole

lot of miles on it, decided to give up the ghost right before Christmas. This has put our important work on hold until we can figure out a new transportation solution.”

The vehicle will be used to transport staff to meetings and conferences and to drive up twisting mountain roads to document mountaintop removal.

So they either need a vehicle donated or about \$20,000 to buy a used 4WD or truck.

*“A good, rugged, running vehicle would be very helpful right now.”*

## How You Can Help:

- If you have such a vehicle you would be willing to donate, you can contact Coal River Mountain Watch on their website <http://www.crmw.net>
- Or you can donate towards the purchase of a vehicle at <https://secure.givelively.org/donate/coal-river-mountain-watch>.
- To donate by check: CRMW, P.O. Box 303, Naoma, WV 25140. Donations to CRMW are tax-deductible.

# Wildfire control in West Virginia: past, present and future

*Continued from page 14*

power, the equipment or the funding to do so. It is imperative this situation be reversed.

In the past few years at least two lives have been lost due to wildfires. Last year a dozen or so homes were destroyed to say nothing of the environmental consequences. I think many West Virginians are lulled into a false sense of security by watching the response to wildfires in other states. If you think that if there is a large wildfire threatening your home, there will be crews, bulldozers and planes arriving to extinguish it, you are sadly mistaken.

At best one or two employees from the Division of Forestry might show up if they are not tied up with other fires and your local volunteer fire department may respond but that is about it. The Division of Forestry has fewer than 100 employees statewide and that includes clerical staff and vacancies.

In recent years, climate change has established a pattern where a normally dry West becomes dryer, and the Eastern portion of the United States has remained near normal in rainfall with pockets of drought occurring. Last summer was exceptionally dry with many wildfires occurring during a time

when they normally do not occur, but drought moderated during the critical fall fire season months. However, occurrence and acres burned were well above average.

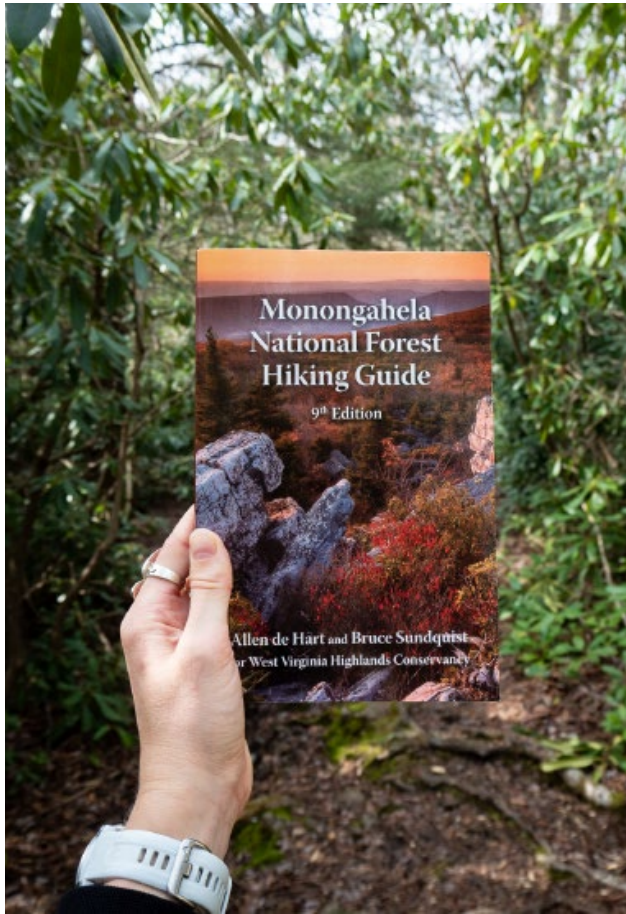
When prolonged dry conditions do occur, West Virginia could easily face a situation like that in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, in the fall of 2016. On November 23, a wildfire burned 17,900 acres, claimed 14 lives, destroyed 2,640 homes and businesses and caused two billion dollars in damages. Fuel conditions in West Virginia are about the same as east Tennessee. A wildfire the magnitude of Gatlinburg's could easily

happen here.

Governor Morrissey and the Legislature have a clear moral duty to see that the Division of Forestry and its wildfire control program are well financed and our forests, our citizens, and our homes and businesses are protected from catastrophic wildfires.

*Robert Beanblossom, a member of the Society of American Foresters, retired after a 42-year career with the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources and moved to western North Carolina in 2015 as the volunteer caretaker at the U.S. Forest Service's Cradle of Forestry in America.*

# Hit the trails with our Mon National Forest Hiking Guide



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

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

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

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

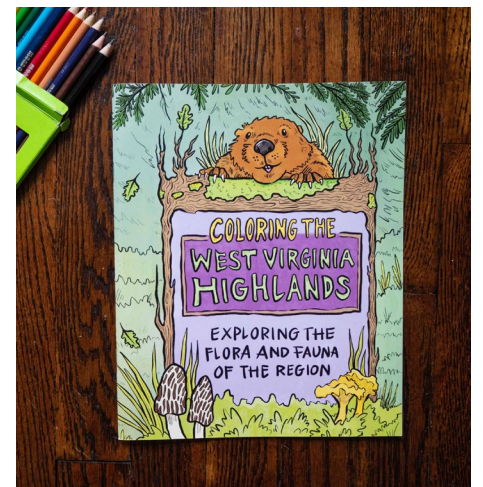
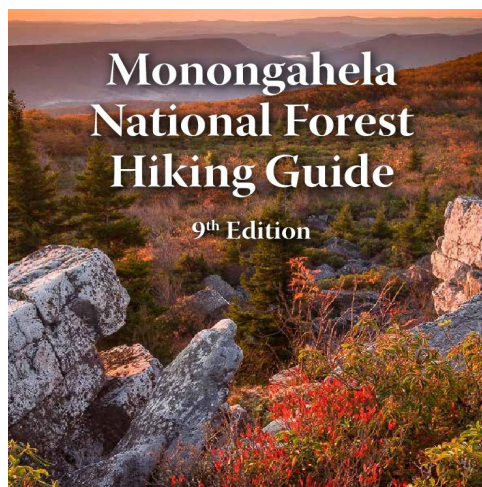
The Monongahela National Forest has long been known as a 'Special Place.' The hiking, backpacking, and cross-country skiing opportunities it provides are among the best in the eastern U.S. New wilderness and backcountry trails have been added to the outstanding areas we have appreciated for decades –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

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

**Send \$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](http://www.wvhighlands.org)**

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