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# *The Highlands Voice*

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## Save the Date: Celebrating the legacy of Helen McGinnis and Dolly Sods Wilderness

By Jordan Howes, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

Mark your calendars for an evening that celebrates one of West Virginia's most significant conservation victories and the woman who helped make it possible. The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy (WVHC), in partnership with Friends of the 500th, will host three special film screenings on Saturday, March 21 and Saturday, March 28, at 6 p.m. at the Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge in Davis, and on Wednesday, April 1 at 6 p.m. at the Media Innovation Center at West Virginia University's Evansdale Crossing.

The featured short documentary, *Dolly Sods and the Legacy of Helen McGinnis*, directed by West Virginia filmmaker Clara Haizlett,



Helen McGinnis exploring Dolly Sods.

tells the story of Helen McGinnis and her determined efforts to secure federal wilderness designation for Dolly Sods Wilderness. At the time, the U.S. Forest Service's "purity doctrine" argued that land damaged by logging, fire and wartime use was ineligible for protection. Through meticulous documentation and

steadfast advocacy alongside fellow conservation leaders, McGinnis helped overturn that long-standing policy.

The breakthrough came in 1975 with passage of the Eastern Wilderness Act, which designated Dolly Sods as one of West Virginia's first federally protected wilderness ar-

eas. The victory reshaped wilderness policy nationwide, proving that scarred landscapes could be restored and permanently protected for future generations. Today, more than 40,000 visitors each year experience Dolly Sods' sweeping vistas and quiet backcountry, and WVHC continues that legacy of stewardship through partnerships such as its work with the Monongahela National Forest to support the Dolly Sods Wilderness Stewards program.

The upcoming showings not only reflect that history but also highlight the deeply personal connections that fuel conservation work. In addition to the featured documentary, attendees will see *Mother Daughter Earth*, an award-winning

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## Save the Date: Celebrating the legacy of Helen McGinnis and Dolly Sods Wilderness

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film by Julia Huffman. The film explores Huffman's relationship with her mother, Beth Little — a former WVHC board member — weaving together themes of memory, legacy, and the powerful influence of Appalachia on their lives.

Following the screening on March 21, Helen McGinnis will participate in a panel discussion and audience Q&A, offering guests the opportunity to hear firsthand about the campaign that helped secure lasting protections for Dolly Sods. As the community reflects on more than five decades since the wilderness designation, the evening serves as both a celebration of progress and a renewed commitment to ensuring West Virginia's natural heritage remains wild and resilient for the next fifty years and beyond.

Attendance is free, though donations are encouraged. Space is limited, and advance registration is required at <https://www.wvhighlands.org/2026/02/13/dolly-sods/>.

A third screening is scheduled in Morgantown, West Virginia, on April 1, 2026, at WVU's Media Innovation Center. Please watch for additional details in the coming weeks and plan to join us for this inspiring tribute to leadership, legacy and the enduring power of protected wilderness.

## E-Day 2026: Recap from Charleston

*By West Virginia Environmental Council*

The halls of the Capitol were buzzing with energy on Monday as West Virginians from around the state came together to uplift and celebrate environmental policy. Thank you to all of the groups who came to the Capitol to be part of WVEC's 36th annual E-day!

We celebrated the work of Tucker United, From Below, Ohio Valley Mutual Aid, Mingo County Community Advocates, and Mason County Community Advocates — all of whom have played a critical role in the environmental movement. From flood recovery to the fight against hyperscale data centers, these groups have organized change in their communities. West Virginia is a better place because of their work.

These groups were honored with certificates the night before E-Day at the first E-Day Eve. WVEC member organizations, board members, and others gathered for a casual evening before the big day. At 7 p.m., all of us gathered together to watch CBS's 60 Minutes coverage of the water crisis in the southern coalfields.

In 1972, a different kind of water crisis took hold in the southern coalfields. On the morning of February 26, 1972, a coal waste dam collapsed on the Middle Fork of Buffalo Creek in Logan County, West Virginia. Hundreds of millions of gallons of water, coal refuse, and silt poured down the mountain, flooding Saunders, Pardee, Lorado, Craneco,



Pictured (from left to right, back row): Olivia Miller, WVHC; Jenna Breeckner, Greenbrier Environmental Group; Quenton King, Appalachian Voices; Morgan King, WV Citizen Action Group; (front) Anna Saab, WV Environmental Council

Lundale, Stowe, Crites, Latrobe, Robinette, Amherstdale, Becco, Fanco, Riley Braeholm, Accoville, Crown, and Kistler. Thousands of West Virginians lost their homes and belongings. More than one thousand were injured or lost their life. The region was devastated due to the improper construction of the coal dams by The Pittston Company.

54 years later we're reminded of the need for protections against disasters. While disasters might not always be preventable, communities can be better prepared when they happen. Disaster preparedness and prevention is the foundation of flood resilience. West Virginians have known the devastation of flooding too many times, but lawmakers and leaders can take action to better pro-

tect their neighbors and themselves. We need more than earlier notice. Lawmakers and leaders must invest in the Flood Resiliency Trust Fund to enable tiered approaches to flood resiliency. Although the House approved a \$25 million investment in the fund yesterday, the Senate still has to approve the allocation. Consider contacting your Senators to urge them to support the allocation.

Our lobbyists continue to fight for issues that impact every West Virginian, including investments in flood resiliency. Help support our work by subscribing to and sharing our newsletter with friends and family, joining an environmental group near you, and donating to keep the fight going. We all have a role to play. What will yours be?

# United States Environmental Protection Agency rescinds the endangerment finding

By Perry Bryant, a proud Highlands Conservancy member since 1990

The United States Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) "endangerment finding" may sound geeky and unimportant, but it is neither. The endangerment finding does not directly regulate greenhouse gases. Rather, it is EPA's finding that greenhouse gases damage public health and welfare. It lays the foundation and provides a rationale for regulating greenhouse gases. Despite sound scientific evidence of the harm to public health that greenhouse gases cause, the endangerment finding was recently rescinded by the Trump Administration.

First, a little history: In 1999, a number of environmental organizations petitioned the George W. Bush Administration to regulate greenhouse gas emissions from new motor vehicles. The Bush Administration rejected this request claiming that greenhouse gas emissions were not pollutants under the Clean Air Act. A number of states, cities and environmental organizations sued, resulting in the 2007 landmark US Supreme Court ruling, *Massachusetts v EPA* (a 5 to 4 decision with Chief Justice Roberts dissenting). The Court held that greenhouse gas-



An aerial image of Dominion's Mount Storm Power Plant in Grant County, West Virginia. (Photo by Raeky)

es were pollutants under the Clean Air Act, and the reasons provided by EPA for not regulating greenhouse gases was inadequate. The Court remanded the issue back to EPA to determine if there was a legitimate reason not to regulate greenhouse gases from new vehicles.

Based on this Court decision, EPA in 2009 under the Obama Administration issued the endangerment findings concluding that six greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide and methane, endangered public health and welfare. EPA

found that these six greenhouse gas emissions were trapping heat in the atmosphere, which contributes to global warming, and results in greater flooding, more frequent and more severe heat waves, more intense hurricanes, higher sea level rise, as well as other adverse impacts on human health and welfare.

These EPA endangerment findings were the foundation for regulating the tailpipe discharges from new motor vehicles, joining the Paris climate accord, and attempting to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from

power plants (the proposal to regulate CO2 at power plants was struck down by the US Supreme Court in *West Virginia v EPA*).

Rescinding the endangerment findings: From the very beginning of President Trump's second term in office, EPA began the process of repealing the endangerment findings. Following a perfunctory public comment period, EPA rescinded the endangerment findings last month (February 2026). It is interesting that when EPA first proposed rescinding the endangerment findings, they relied on a US Department of Energy report written by five climate skeptics that argued the dangers of human-induced climate change were being overstated. This report was roundly criticized for cherry-picking data and implying there was a lack of scientific consensus where a consensus was clear. In the final decision to rescind the endangerment findings, EPA dropped any reference to this DOE report or any real scientific reasoning on the harm of greenhouse gases relying instead on economic and legal reasoning.

The science is settled: On this issue of whether greenhouse gases endanger public health or welfare there

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## THE WAY THE VOICE WORKS

The Highlands Voice is the official publication of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy. While it is the official publication, every story in it does not represent an official position of the Conservancy. While all of our members share the general goal "to promote, encourage, and work for the conservation—including both preservation and wise use—and appreciation of the natural resources of West Virginia and the nation," our members often have differing views upon the best way to do that.

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

## West Virginia Highlands Conservancy Online Store Catalog

### Apparel

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

Please include \$6.25 shipping for Apparel items

### Drinkware

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

### Stickers

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

### Books

- Monongahela National Forest Hiking Guide, 9th Edition: \$21.95 + \$5.38 shipping
- Fighting to Protect the Highlands: \$15.95 + \$5.38 shipping
- The Nature and Scenery of the West Virginia Highlands, 2nd Edition: \$29.95 + \$5.38 shipping

**To order by mail** make checks payable to West Virginia Highlands Conservancy and send to P.O. Box 306, Charleston, WV 25321. Please indicate the item and relevant color and size if applicable. To view and purchase store items online, visit [wvhighlands.org](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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## United States Environmental Protection Agency rescinds the Endangerment Findings

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was no uncertainty in 2009 when the endangerment findings were first developed, and the evidence is even clearer today. For example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the world's foremost collection of climate change scientists, wrote in 2023:

- “Human activities, principally through emissions of greenhouse gases, have unequivocally caused global warming.
- Human-caused climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe. This has led to widespread adverse impacts and related losses and damages to nature and people (high confidence).
- Increases in extreme heat events have resulted in human mortality and morbidity (very high confidence).
- (And) climate change is a threat to human well-being and planetary health (very high confidence). There is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all (very high confidence).”



Where will this all go? First, the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council and other environmental organizations have already pledged to challenge the rescinding of the endangerment findings in Court. The Supreme Court may well end up deciding this issue. If so, will they uphold the findings in *Massachusetts v EPA* that greenhouse gases are pollutants under the Clean Air Act? Or will they require additional Congressional authorization before EPA can regulate greenhouse gases?

Beyond the Courts, it is clear that there will be no meaningful Congressional action on global warming until there is a new President in 2029. And even with a new President, a lot will depend on the make-up of Congress following the 2026 and 2028 Congressional elections. In the meantime, other countries need to step up and continue to curtail their emissions to lessen the impact of global warming. And we all must take steps to reduce our own carbon and methane footprint.

## Thoughts from our President

The sun is actually shining, and the horses are rolling around in the field. I know we will have more winter weather, but right now it is lovely and a big change from the ice and snow! That does it for the weather report—let's get down to facts!

The West Virginia Legislative session will be over by the time this letter is shared. Many bad bills have gone forward, but some have been stopped by our intrepid lobbyists and legislative team. The official adjournment of the legislative session is March 14 – we are in the home stretch!

The lack of clean water in southern West Virginia continues to be a major problem with no adequate solution in sight, so we will be continuing updates on that issue.

The microgrid/data center continues to be a major thorn in everyone's side (or almost everyone). The appeal to the WV Department of Environmental Protection Air Quality Board (the WVHC appealed the decision to grant the permit for the microgrid to Fundamental Data) was denied, although we had many solid grounds. The next step will be the West Virginia Supreme Court; a notice has been filed, and the brief will follow. So, we need your continued support on this; the appeal is going to take a long time and a lot of resources. There is a bill pending in the legislature that would make all data center/microgrid applications confidential and not available to the public.

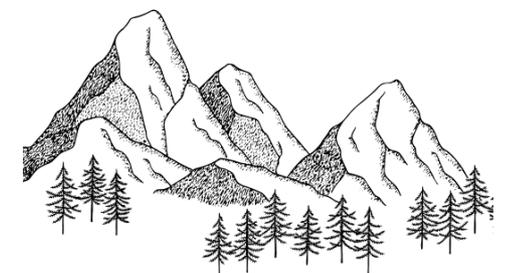
Many other things are on our minds and our agendas, but let's pivot to things to look forward to:

On March 28, the Conservancy and the Friends of the 500th will be screening two films about women in conservation. The premiere showing is scheduled for March 21, at the Canaan Valley Wildlife Refuge, which is now sold out, so the March 28 screening is the next available! There will also be a screening in Morgantown, WV, on April 1 at WVU's Media Innovation Center.

“Dolly Sods: the Legacy of Helen McGinnis” is a short film featuring Helen McGinnis, a woman who was instrumental in obtaining wilderness status for Dolly Sods. She will be there for discussion following the screening. The second feature screening of the event is “Mother Daughter Earth,” a film by Julia Huffman about her mother, Beth Little, who was a very active past member of the WVHC. Both are worth seeing, so please look at our website and social media and reserve your seat at the available screenings. Tickets are free, but donations are encouraged. I hope to see you there!

See you in the Highlands,

**Marilyn Shoenfeld**  
President  
West Virginia Highlands  
Conservancy



# Crosscut saws in the wilderness with the Dolly Sods Wilderness Stewards

By Dave Johnston, Dolly Sods Wilderness Stewards

The most fundamental principle of designated wilderness in the United States is that there should be as little human intervention in the natural environment as possible. Wilderness is intended to be untrammelled – free of human control and manipulation. To the extent possible, the goal of wilderness is to allow natural processes and events to play out on their own terms.

That doesn't mean that wilderness is meant to exclude humans. To the contrary, the Wilderness Act specifically establishes the federal wilderness system so that people can enjoy the benefits of wilderness. But the presence of humans, and their use of the wilderness, must be compatible with preservation of the wilderness character for which the wilderness was created.

Accordingly, trails are created to provide people with a means of access to experience the wilderness. While trails themselves are a human mark on the wilderness, they allow people to be guided through the environment in a way that minimizes their impact and avoids more widespread evidence of human presence. Even so, wilderness trails are intentionally narrow, rocky and uneven, and less engineered than other trails, in keeping with the goal of a primitive experience.

Among the natural events that inevitably occur in wilderness are trees falling across those trails, and vegetation growing to encroach upon the trail passageway. Ide-



Crosscut sawyers in action! (Photo by Dave Johnston)

ally, we could just let nature take its course, and treat these obstacles as part of the wilderness experience. But down trees tend to force people off the trail, where rogue bypass trails create new impact and increase erosion, and which can be unsafe, especially on steep hillsides. Similarly, overgrown trails encourage people to abandon the designated route and make their own paths, which frequently are poorly routed and destructive. Keeping the trails reasonably clear may minimize further, and more disruptive, damage to the wilderness environment.

So, a modest level of human intervention can be justified to maintain the trail corridor and thus protect the adjacent wilderness. But even this is still subject to limitations. In keeping with its ideal to be free of the trappings of mechanized modern civilizations, the Wilderness Act prohibits the use of motorized equipment. Chain saws, hedge

trimmers and weed eaters need not apply.

Enter – or reenter – the old-fashioned crosscut saw. This tried-and-true tool, which once contributed to the leveling of West Virginia's forests, is now the key method of keeping the trails of our regrown wilderness forests clear. In wilderness, they are mostly used for bucking – cutting trees and limbs that have fallen and are essentially horizontal, which makes them perfect for clearing trails.

Despite their reputation, with proper training crosscut saws are not difficult or physically demanding to use, and can be fun. Crosscut sawyers learn a step-by-step process to define the desired outcome, analyze the forces acting on a log and how it will respond to cutting in order to plan their cut, identify potential hazards and an escape route, and how to safely control the behavior of the log as the cut is finished. For most

cuts, gravity and the carefully honed action of the teeth do most of the work.

In 2023, the Dolly Sods Wilderness Stewards formed its Crosscut Sawyer team. Our sawyers are trained by the US Forest Service specialists, which leads to certification as an A or B-level sawyer, qualified to participate in bucking in the Monongahela National Forest. The men and women of our team work through the spring to clear the blown down trees that always occur during the bitter Dolly Sods winters, and remain available to respond to reports of down trees during the rest of the season.

Not surprisingly, the making of crosscut saws is a craft that died out long ago. While saws made these days are usable, they are not the equal of those made and used decades ago. Crosscut sawyers seek out legacy saws that can be refurbished and returned to useful service.

Highlands Conservancy members Cindy Rank and Larry Thomas donated saws that had been hanging in their sheds for years, rusty but intact, to the Wilderness Stewards. Cleaned up with a bit of elbow grease and sharpened by the Forest Service saw specialist, these saws are now being actively used by the Stewards' Crosscut team – and they cut like a butter knife!

In addition to crosscut saws, we use other hand tools to keep the trail clear. Hand saws are more appropriate for smaller branches impinging

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## Crosscut saws in the wilderness with the Dolly Sods Wilderness Stewards

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on the trail and can be carried on even routine hikes. We use single and double-bit axes for cases where a saw would be unwieldy or potentially damaged. And with loppers we try to regularly cruise the trails to keep the fast-growing rhododendron and laurel at bay. The Crosscut Sawyer team is busy with trail clearing projects throughout the season!

The Crosscut team now has a full complement of tools, and a solid core of qualified sawyers take on the challenges of keeping the trails of Dolly Sods open for visitors to experience the wilderness while protecting the surrounding resource. But with more volunteers we can do more. We'd like to more regularly monitor the trails of Dolly Sods, and also expand to begin covering the trails of Roaring Plains West, Otter Creek and the Laurel Fork wilderness areas of northern West Virginia.

We'd like you to consider joining us. We are inviting new volunteers to participate in the next Crosscut Sawyer training by the Forest Service, to be held the weekend of March 14-15 at Seneca Rocks. The training takes place over two days, with Saturday in the classroom covering the principles, tools and techniques of crosscut and axe work. Then Sunday is in the field, putting those concepts into practice and



Wilderness Steward and Crosscut Sawyer, Dave Mong pictured working on a trail. (Photo by Dave Johnston)

picking up the needed skills. This leads to certification as either an A or B-level sawyer, and you'll be part of the team keeping the trails in Dolly Sods passable.

Sawyer certification requires certification in at least Basic First Aid/CPR. If you do not already have that, you can attend the first aid class the Forest Service is offering on Friday, the day before, also at Seneca Rocks. If you aren't able to make that, your crosscut certification will simply be pending and you can still work with use on project on the wilderness trails. To sign up, first go to this link (<https://www.wvhighlands.org/dolly-sods-wilderness-stewards-form/>) and fill out the form to become a Wilderness Steward. Then go to this link (<http://bit.ly/4cIQfSI>) and sign up for the training. There is a limit to how many can be in the training, but if that is exceeded, you'll be added to a wait list.

If you have any questions, email the Wilderness Stewards coordinator at [dollysodsstewards@wvhighlands.org](mailto:dollysodsstewards@wvhighlands.org).

## March 2026 legislative update

*By Luanne McGovern, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy*

As of this writing, the 88th West Virginia Legislative session is almost complete. Following the Legislature sometimes feels like one is living in an alternative reality. When faced with the myriads of problems in West Virginia – flooding, lack of clean drinking water, foster care crisis, population decline, school closures – the Legislature continues to focus on fringe and downright crazy ideas that will do nothing to address these critical issues.

Over 2,750 bills have been introduced this session (quite possibly a record) and so far, fewer than 50 have been passed. For comparison, last year, only 10% of the bills introduced were passed. The “positive” side of this is that there is less time available to advance the truly bad bills that the Highlands Conservancy focuses on – those that impact the Highlands and the environment.

Unfortunately, SB641 may advance. This bill would further weaken inspection requirements for aboveground storage tanks, requirements that were put in place following the 2014 Freedom Industries spill in Charleston. Thanks to everyone who responded to our action alert SB641 Alert and letting your representatives know that protecting clean water is an imperative.

HB4983 – “Authorizing the Department of Commerce to promulgate a legislative rule relating to certification of a microgrid district or certification as a high-impact

data center” – is the follow-up bill to last year's HB2014 about data centers. Multiple attempts were made to make meaningful amendments to the bill, especially around water usage and return of local control. Unfortunately, all the amendments were defeated. At the last minute, a few words were added that would require developers to disclose whether their water use would contribute to an “inordinate burden” on neighboring properties' water access. While we appreciate the effort that went into obtaining this addition, the wording is so vague and the requirements so, it is difficult to imagine how this would be enforced. In addition, all the information a developer must provide to the Commerce Department is confidential, so there is no mechanism for neighbors to even obtain information on water access. The bill has passed the House and will be approved by the Senate.

Numerous bad bills died a quiet death in committee. HB4556 (net metering), SB88 (community air monitoring), SB475 (the anti-science bill), multiple data center bills, and multiple off-road vehicle bills, again introduced by Senator Maynard, are dead for another year, but will rise like zombies next year. SB708, which would improve river access across the state, was again, unfortunately, defeated in the Senate.

WVHC partners each year with the West Virginia Environmental Council and their fantastic lobbyists, who do a herculean job in the face of monumental opposition. If you can, consider donating to support their critical efforts at [wvecouncil.org](http://wvecouncil.org)

Thanks again for your support during the last 60 days.

# Native species highlight – Musky and its increasing popularity as a game fish

By Christa Clasgens, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

Throughout West Virginia, many native species have become triumphant game fish to anglers local and out of state. From Small Mouth to brook trout and even Wall-eye. There is a fish with a very long history in the Mountain State that has been coined ‘the fish of 10,000 casts’ because of the difficulty landing such a prized fish.

The Musky or Muskellunge fish with prehistoric features and predatory shape and behavior make this fish the king of the rivers. These fish have a high prey drive and are known to grow to exceptionally large sizes. The state record being recorded at 55 inches. But it’s not only the size and the difficulty that is recruiting new interest in these fish. The West Virginia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has been monitoring populations and stocking fingerling Musky since 1958. At times, implementing a “stocking moratorium” to evaluate if natural reproduction is sustaining in certain rivers.

Today, current trends in the angling world have increased attraction toward this species as the next “challenge” for anglers across the state. In a niche part of the angling community, many fly anglers are now also targeting musky with large baitfish style flies and heavy-duty rods and reels. This method is still more challenging than using traditional gear as the larger flies and gear are more difficult to cast and can be taxing after just a couple



Christa Clasgens with Natives Fly Fishing guide Jimmy Glaspell on the Tygart river. Musky measuring 36 inches caught using fly gear. (Photo by Jimmy Glaspell)

hours on the water. However, this doesn’t deter anglers; it feeds their desire to land the fish of a lifetime using unique lures and gear.

So how does increased pressure on these fish affect the fishery? It comes with a learning curve to best determine the health and population of these fish. The WV DNR’s monitoring of population is helpful, and increased stocking over the year has adjusted for population loss with increased pressure on these fish. A reel survey conducted by local anglers in spring of 2024 saw fourteen Musky landed by sixteen individuals over three days. These were highly unprecedented numbers as anglers are

lucky to get 1-3 musky in a year while targeting them regularly. Even more unexpected was all gear used was fly equipment making the staggering success even more unexpected.

Keeping these fish safe comes with the same protocol for any fish while angling for them: once caught, keep them wet. Limit their time out of the water. Only keep them long enough to snap a quick picture and place them back in the water until they can swim off on their own. A point of caution – these fish are toothy! Ensure you have the proper tools to remove the hook and keep your hand away from their mouth.

These fish have hundreds of razor-sharp teeth and a trip to the hospital for stitches is typical if bitten.

Unknown to many – Musky are a cold-water species. They thrive in colder water with lots of other fish to feed on. Targeting them in high water temperatures is not recommended as their mortality rate increases when caught in temperatures exceeding 70 degrees. The main rivers that host the best Musky fishing are the Little Kanawha, the Buckhannon, and the Tygart.

If you ever have the success of landing one of these frightening but beautiful fish, take a moment to appreciate their hundreds of years of survival, conservation efforts by state and local agencies, and that it only took you 9,999 casts to catch one. As always, practice safe catch-and-release for current and future generations.

**Like what you’re reading? Join us next edition for another installment of “Christa’s Catch!”**



# Save the Date for WVHC’s 2026 Fall Review: “From Ridges to Rivers: Safeguarding What Sustains Us”

By Jordan Howes, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy

This fall, the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy invites conservationists, advocates and community members from across the region to gather in the highlands for a weekend of learning, reflection and connection.

Mark your calendars for **Oct. 23–25**, when WVHC’s annual Fall Review returns—this time at Canaan Valley Resort in Davis, West Virginia—under the theme “**From Ridges to Rivers: Safeguarding What Sustains Us.**”

From the forested ridgelines that define Appalachia’s skyline to the streams and rivers that sustain our communities and wildlife, the landscapes we cherish are deeply interconnected. The 2026 Fall Re-



The WVHC’s last Fall Review at Canaan Valley was in 2024. (Photo by Olivia Miller)

view will explore how we protect these vital systems—and the people who depend on them—in the face of growing environmental pressures.

Set against the sweeping views of Canaan Valley, the weekend will

bring together environmental leaders, scientists, advocates, and concerned citizens to share ideas, build partnerships, and strengthen the movement to protect West Virginia’s lands and waters.

As always, our Fall Review will offer opportunities to dig into the issues shaping our region’s future while also enjoying the outdoors and the company of fellow conservationists. Whether you’re a long-time supporter or new to WVHC’s work, this gathering is a chance to recharge, reconnect, and recommit to the work ahead.

We’re currently developing the weekend’s program and will share more details—including speakers, sessions, and activities—in the coming months.

For now, save the date and plan to join us in beautiful Canaan Valley this October for a weekend dedicated to protecting the ridges, rivers and communities that sustain us all.

Registration information will be announced soon.

## BECOME A WVHC MEMBER

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	Individual	Family	Org.
Senior	\$15		
Student	\$15		
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Other	\$15		
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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)

# South Fork Coal Company was a no-show at violation hearing

By Willie Dodson, *Appalachian Voices*

South Fork Coal Company failed to show up to a Feb. 3 hearing with the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection regarding an array of long-standing violations at the company's mines.

Violations discussed at the hearing included the company's failures to properly construct and maintain drainage systems and to backfill, stabilize and revegetate mined-out areas at its Blue Knob Surface and Laurel Creek Contour mines. The violations also included failure to revegetate areas of its Lost Flats #1 Surface Mine and to prevent excessive erosion from its Pretty Ridge Surface Mine. All of these operations are in Greenbrier County near Richwood.

The hearing was requested by South Fork Coal Company last year in response to a series of show-cause orders that DEP issued against the company's mines. A show-cause order is the most severe enforcement action mining regula-



Active strip mining at South Fork Coal Company's Rocky Run Surface Mine in Greenbrier County, West Virginia. The Monongahela National Forest sits adjacent to the mine's footprint. *(Photo courtesy of Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance)*

tors can take against noncompliant coal companies, short of suspending or revoking the company's mining permits. By failing to show up at the Feb. 3 hearing, South Fork Coal Company appears to be forgoing its opportunity to defend its right to retain the implicated min-

ing permits.

South Fork Coal Company has faced a flurry of litigation and public scrutiny in recent years due to reclamation and water-quality infractions like those at issue in last week's hearing. The company was also exposed by conservation groups for illegally hauling coal

through the Monongahela National Forest, and conservation groups sued the U.S. Forest Service for allowing that to occur.

South Fork declared bankruptcy in February 2025, intending to offload debts, restructure and continue operations. In the summer of 2025, the Trump administration rapidly and improperly issued after-the-fact authorizations designed to allow the company to continue using Forest Service roads as coal haulage routes. Despite this, the company's mismanagement and mounting expenses prevented South Fork Coal from maintaining operations.

In September 2025, South Fork informed the bankruptcy court that it could not find a buyer for the company's ailing operations — including a series of mines, haul roads and a preparation plant that are saddled with ongoing and expensive environmental problems. As a result, the company said it

*Continued on page 11*

## 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 [christa.clasgens@wvhighlands.org](mailto:christa.clasgens@wvhighlands.org)

## Are you on our email list?

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



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

## South Fork Coal Company was a no-show at violation hearing

*Continued from page 10*

would have to liquidate all holdings and cease to exist.

This turn of events spared the watersheds where the company operates, most notably the Cherry River, from ongoing problems caused by this bad actor's new mining. But it also meant that cleanup of the vast scars the company's mines had already inflicted on the land and streams was left in limbo.

When a coal company loses a mining permit due to noncompliance, the provider of the company's surety bond — a type of environmental insurance policy — may choose whether to take on the task of reclaiming the mine itself or to hand over the necessary funds to regulators to conduct the reclamation. One major problem with the system is that these bond providers are allowed an indefinite period of time to make that decision, which can leave land unreclaimed and waterways repeatedly inundated with sediment and other contaminants.

Conservation groups are invested in the long-term health and productivity of the South Fork Cherry River watershed. The area is immediately adjacent to the Monongahela National Forest, a



The South Fork of the Cherry River is considered critical habitat for the endangered candy darter. (Photo by Willie Dodson)

short distance from the Cranberry Wilderness. The Cherry River is prime trout habitat and home to the endangered candy darter. And the high ridges South Fork Coal Company razed contained some of the continent's southernmost stands of red spruce forest.

Within the year, we are hoping that South Fork Coal Company's permits will be revoked and bonds forfeited so that reclamation can commence — whether conducted by DEP or the derelict coal company's insurer. Along with our partners at the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy and Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance, Appalachian Voices is closely watching this situation and seeking dialogue with the West Virginia DEP so that we can understand, report on and hopefully support the agency's plan for reclamation and recovery of this treasured landscape.

## Hit the trails with our Mon National Forest Hiking Guide

Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the West Virginia Highlands

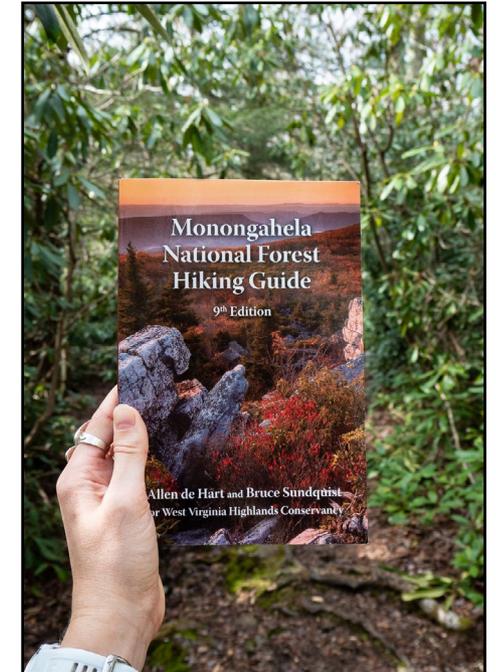
Conservancy, the new edition of the treasured guide to every trail in the Monongahela National Forest features brand-new topographic maps and Kent Mason's gorgeous photos, all in color.

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, back-



packing, 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).

*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.*



These mountains bring us together.  
Let's keep the Highlands wild. *Be part of the legacy.*

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