



DEFENDING APPALACHIA'S FUTURE

YOUR IMPACT AT WORK 

FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE CAPITAL AND BACK AGAIN

2024 has been a groundbreaking year for Appalachia. Many of our communities are reaping the benefits of massive investments in the region as former coal towns revive themselves, rural areas upgrade to cleaner energy and workers clean up abandoned mines — all with federal dollars allocated in recent years.

In 2021 and 2022, we celebrated as policies we championed — shaped by the communities we serve — became law. Now, Appalachian Voices is working with local leaders, residents and partners at all levels of government to ensure that the Biden administration's historic investments in clean energy, environmental justice and communities impacted by fossil fuels are effective and meet local needs. We'll fight tooth and nail to defend these investments and make sure the next president and Congress don't pull the rug out from under our communities.

Amid all of this, we witnessed widespread destruction from Hurricane Helene that requires enormous rebuilding in ways that make our communities more resilient to the next natural disaster supercharged by climate change. We know that a rapid transition to clean energy is not just necessary to cut pollution and preserve our pocketbooks, it's also part of how we protect the land, water and people of Appalachia and the Southeast.

Whether we're going door-to-door in North Carolina, rallying in Tennessee, hosting community meetings in Virginia or sitting down with decision-makers at our nation's capital, that simple mission — protecting the land, water and people — drives our team and our members.



BRINGING SOLAR TO COAL COMMUNITIES

We're helping schools, local businesses and other entities make their solar aspirations a reality. As a leading partner in the Appalachian Solar Finance Fund, so far we have supported **62 solar projects** in Central Appalachia by deploying **\$2 million** in strategic grants drawing on federal funds that we helped attract for the renewable economy. With this, we've leveraged **\$13.6 million** in private investment. These efforts have built **6.6 megawatts** of solar power, which is creating jobs and will save over **\$27 million** in lifetime energy costs.

Appalachian Solar Finance Fund jump-starts clean energy projects

With 35 solar projects installed and dozens more underway, the Appalachian Solar Finance Fund is helping schools, churches, community institutions and businesses clear financial and technical hurdles to go solar. With each project, we're making an immediate positive impact and building momentum for more clean energy in Appalachia.

In Leslie County, Kentucky, the county's animal shelter will save \$5,000 a year in electricity costs thanks to a new rooftop solar array. The up-front project costs totaled \$112,500, but with \$22,500 in grant funding from the Appalachian Solar Finance Fund, combined with additional

contributions from The Nature Conservancy and Mountain Association, the county only had to pay \$20,000.

The county will also be able to obtain a tax credit from the federal government for this project, thanks to the Inflation Reduction Act, making the final project cost essentially zero.

"It just makes economic sense for the county," says Anna Carey, special projects manager for the Leslie County Fiscal Court. "It would decrease bills, and we could hook it up to batteries. And it would offer more long-term resiliency."



TURNING COMMUNITY VISIONS INTO REALITY

Appalachian communities have big dreams for the future, and we're making the most of new federal opportunities to help communities create long-lasting, sustainable progress. The Inflation Reduction Act, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and other laws have opened funding doors for communities affected by the decline of coal. We're combining these and other resources with direct assistance to resource-strapped communities to ensure these dollars lead to transformative change.

Community meetings form backbone of long-term projects

On an August evening, residents of the small Southwest Virginia town of Pennington Gap gathered in small groups to discuss whether addressing abandoned buildings, investing in flood-mitigating recreational spaces or supporting the community garden would be most beneficial.

This gathering was part of the second round of Community Strong meetings Appalachian Voices hosted with five small communities in Virginia's historic coal-fields this year. The effort was funded by a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency grant to help residents survive and thrive in the face of economic difficulties, climate disasters and other hurdles. Listening to local voices and facilitating conversations about what projects community members want to see are among the first steps in this multi-year effort, as we assist residents in developing concrete project plans that can achieve their goals.

"I am very supportive of any and all that helps the town and community, and want more people involved to help



support the community projects," says local resident and meeting participant David Sword.

Now we're pursuing funding avenues to make these community-sourced project plans into brick-and-mortar reality!

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES WITH VITAL RESOURCES

The story is similar across many rural communities — local government staff and residents are working hard to make their towns shine. But often, cash-strapped towns and counties don't have the staff needed to apply for state and federal funding opportunities or implement new programs. The Appalachian Voices New Economy Team is stepping in to fill that gap.

Brownfields revitalization in Pound, Virginia

Decades of economic hardship have saddled many Appalachian communities with buildings in disrepair. Run-down buildings are not only an eyesore and a lost opportunity for community use — these sites, known as brownfields, can also pose health and environmental hazards. That's the case with several buildings in Pound, Virginia, that are falling into the river and impeding progress on a riverbank project the town has long envisioned.

In spring of 2023, New Economy Program Coordinator Emma Kelly began talking with local leaders about ways the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality's Brownfields Program, funded with federal dollars, could address dilapidated buildings and help the town develop exciting

new projects. They also looped in a West Virginia University program with a record of engaging local communities in brownfield redevelopment.

Since then, we've held multiple community events where local residents joined experts to inventory sites and then ranked priorities for redevelopment. The result is a short list of sites that are ready for the next stage! Our team will be writing grants, managing projects and continuing to facilitate engagement among the stakeholders. We're looking at several funding sources, including brownfields grants, to help Pound fix up dilapidated buildings, reduce flood risk and create new recreation opportunities.



DEFENDING AGAINST NEW GAS BUILDOUT

Our communities want clean air, clean water and affordable energy. But regional power companies are doubling down on harmful, costly fossil fuels at the expense of our communities. Utilities like the Tennessee Valley Authority, Dominion Energy and Duke Energy all want to build power plants fueled by climate-polluting methane gas — but residents across Appalachia and the Southeast are pushing back!

Unraveling the web of methane gas

Distraught communities learned this summer that federal authorities allowed Mountain Valley Pipeline to go into service despite numerous safety issues. We remain committed to providing community members with support and resources to monitor restoration efforts, improve safety standards and increase emergency funding for counties along the route.

Developers renewed their push for the proposed MVP Southgate extension, shortening its length but increasing the amount of gas it would carry. The project joins a web of newly proposed methane gas projects across the region, including the largest two expansions in the country.

Duke Energy, Dominion Energy, the Tennessee Valley Authority, Williams Companies, Enbridge and Kinder-Morgan all want to build new methane gas power plants and major gas pipelines in our region.

We're challenging these reckless plans at all levels — in the courts and in regulatory proceedings — and we're



raising awareness of these threats by holding local meetings, going door-to-door and supporting concerned residents at every step. Our coalitions have successfully stopped new pipelines and fossil fuel-fired power plants in the past, and we're determined to do so again.



Watch Michael Hawkins tell his story:



Resident speaks out against Ridgeline Pipeline

Middle Tennessee resident Michael Hawkins doesn't want the proposed Ridgeline Pipeline cutting across his property. The Jackson County, Tennessee, landowner worked for decades to create his "quiet, little life," along Flynn Creek, but Enbridge Inc.'s plans to run part of its 122-mile pipeline through his property threaten to upend his peace.

"They are forcing this pipeline on us residents and us ratepayers, us landowners," says Hawkins. "And we do not want it."

His love for his land shines through the way he speaks of its forests, waterways and geological features. He becomes almost giddy when talking about the Flynn Creek Impact Crater,

which was formed approximately 360 million years ago after a meteor struck the area and created an extremely rare type of cave on his land.

Hawkins worries that the TVA-backed Ridgeline Pipeline, which could come within a few hundred feet of his home, will ruin his water, deface his land and restrict his access to different parts of his property.

"I want to implore folks that hold positions with decision-making powers to please listen to people like me, people that have a lot to lose, that love what they have and don't want to give it up."

BUILDING A CLEAN ENERGY FUTURE

The cost of electricity keeps going up, it's less reliable than it used to be, and there's only one way to get it — a power company that keeps us dependent on fossil fuels. Communities need to have a say in how electricity is produced so it can be affordable and doesn't pollute the air we breathe and the water we drink. We're working with communities across our region to oppose polluting power plants and build a cleaner future.



Photos: John Todd Waterman

The People's Voice on TVA's energy plan

In January, advocates and community members gathered in Nashville, Tennessee, for the People's Voice on TVA's Energy Plan, a day-long forum on the Tennessee Valley Authority's roadmap for how the utility will meet the Tennessee Valley's growing demand for energy during the next 20-plus years.

We joined partner groups in organizing the event after TVA and its Senate-appointed governing board ignored requests to allow public input into the public utility's 20-year plan. Soon after the event, U.S. representatives from

Tennessee introduced a bipartisan bill that would require the federal utility to meaningfully involve the public in its energy planning.

Our coalition's campaign to hold TVA accountable is growing. In September, we held a rally in Nashville calling on TVA to move past fossil fuels and invest in clean energy that lowers electric bills, reduces pollution and provides reliable power. Meanwhile, we're building momentum with local utilities to deploy more renewable energy resources.



Photo: J.M. Davidson

We celebrated several wins for clean energy and affordable power during Virginia's legislative session early in the year — including a new, common-sense law that protects Virginians from having their utilities shut off during conditions such as extreme weather and states of emergency.

PROTECTING CLEAN AIR WITH CITIZEN SCIENCE

We all deserve clean air, but in rural and urban areas alike, polluting industries have put residents' health at risk. We have partnered with 18 community groups to deploy scores of monitoring devices and help residents track their air quality.



Upper South and Appalachia Citizen Air Monitoring Project

In fall 2023, we launched the Upper South and Appalachia Citizen Air Monitoring Project to enable ordinary residents in five states to monitor their air quality. This project specifically tracks soot or fine dust from surface coal mines and coal truck traffic, power plants, natural gas compressor stations, landfills and other heavy industry.

Appalachian Voices and our partners installed small, easy-to-use devices that continuously monitor and record particulate matter levels in the air, thanks to a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Appalachian Voices analyzes the data quarterly and publishes brief reports for each device. As of fall 2024, we've installed nearly 50 monitors.

Exposure to elevated levels of soot and fine dust cause nearly 48,000 premature deaths in the United States every year, according to the American Lung Association. It causes pulmonary and respiratory conditions and is linked to cancer and premature deaths. Our air monitoring project prioritizes communities where a high percentage of residents are people of color, low-income or members of historically disadvantaged communities.

Learn more:



PROTECTING COMMUNITIES FROM COAL POLLUTION

Coal mining continues to harm land, water, air and people across Appalachia, whether at active mines or the massive, abandoned sites companies are failing to clean up. From on-the-ground monitoring and community engagement to lobbying in the halls of Congress, we're taking on the coal industry to protect our communities.

Advocacy for miners with black lung continues

Black lung disease remains at epidemic levels in Appalachia, with miners contracting the deadly, incurable illness younger than previous generations, and at record rates.

Appalachian Voices is working with the Black Lung Association and others to improve benefits for miners with black

lung and their families, and to ease the process for applying for those benefits. In May, we traveled with members of the Kentucky, Virginia and West Virginia Black Lung Associations to Washington, D.C., where we asked members of Congress to support legislation to increase black lung disability benefits and to improve the benefits process for miners' survivors.

We and our partners also pushed for stronger protections for coal miners from silica dust, a leading cause of black lung disease. In response, the Mine Safety and Health Administration cut by half the level of silica dust miners can be legally exposed to. The rule needs stronger implementation tools, but it was an important step forward. Now, some legislators are trying to undo this progress, and our coalition is working to thwart their efforts.

"We know that those in the mines are getting sicker faster than ever because of silica dust, and we're grateful MSHA finally took action to help," says Vonda Robinson, vice president of the National Black Lung Association.





Zombie mines endanger nearby communities

Across Central Appalachia, vast areas of unrestored mine land are posing dangers to nearby communities, including landslides, toxic run-off and more. When surface mines are left bare, they can increase the severity of flooding because there are no trees or vegetation to slow the flow of water.

Reclamation cannot fully restore the land back to its pre-mining state, but it can curb hazards to people and the environment. In some cases, mined lands can be cleaned up for specific community and economic uses.

A law passed in 1977 was supposed to ensure that coal companies cleaned up land that they mined. Unfortunately, companies have used loopholes and bankruptcies to avoid this responsibility, and holding them accountable

is difficult. In Tennessee alone, a recent report showed that about two-thirds of the state's mines are behind on cleanup, and the funding shortfall for reclamation is over \$34 million.

Appalachian Voices is working to improve mine cleanup and eliminate “zombie mines” — mines that are neither producing coal nor being reclaimed. We have been monitoring these mines for years alongside community members to document negative impacts, and we will continue to pursue justice in court and push lawmakers and regulatory agencies to improve mine cleanup.

We will persist in our efforts to hold coal companies accountable and ensure that they don't leave their messes behind.

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