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YEARS
AND STILL
FREE

The **Appalachian** **VOICE**

Feral Ponies
of the **Grayson**
Highlands



Energy Overdrive
Fossil Fuels in Appalachia

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About the Cover



Three Grayson Highland ponies walk along a rugged hillside. See more of photographer Martin Seelig's work at CatchLight Gallery in Jefferson, North Carolina, and online.

Inset: Smokestacks at the Tennessee Valley Authority's Kingston Fossil Plant. Photo by Abby Hassler

A note from our executive director

Paddling the rivers and creeks of Appalachia never gets old. Each bend can reveal a new wonder or a fresh set of obstacles and dangers to navigate. Sometimes you're riding a strong current with the wind at your back. If you're able to hold to strategic lines through the rapids, your progress is rapid. At other moments, the headwinds might be forceful enough that just holding your ground can take everything you've got. You need to approach any river trip ready for the full range of possible challenges and opportunities.

This past year has brought its own share of challenges. Energy demand is rising, and with it, threats to our communities and our land, air and water (pg. 16). Across the highest levels of government, we're seeing actions that put corporate profits above our health and well-being, moving us backward on environmental protections (pg. 28), public health and worker safety (pg. 22).

But Appalachian Voices and our partners have also made great progress, such as a win for the pristine headwaters of the Cherry and Gauley

rivers (pg. 24) and the defeat of proposed methane gas power plants in Tennessee and Virginia.

Also in Virginia, we championed successful legislation that will lead to more clean energy and lower electric bills. There's a lot more work ahead, but we're proud to have played a key role in passing Virginia's first program to help mitigate the impact of large energy users like data centers on our power grid.

And we are working harder than ever to implement transformative solutions. Appalachian Voices is part of a growing network focused on long-term preparedness for natural disasters — efforts that bring people together to support strong economies, clean energy and safer communities (pg. 12). The day after this publication goes to press, we're thrilled to host a community tree-planting event on a former coal mine, welcoming others to heal the land with us.

When the waters get rough, our ability to steer strategically around the rocks and paddle hard together to punch through the waves in our path becomes more important than ever.

In this issue, you'll find stories from around the region, about the challenges we face and how we overcome them by working with our neighbors and partners. You'll read about the wild places and wildlife that we have the privilege and responsibility to protect, and about the determined, creative people who help make Appalachia so extraordinary.

On the last page, you can learn more about Appalachian Voices and how we defend Appalachia's natural landscapes and communities and help create more vibrant places to live. I hope you'll accept our invitation to get involved.

For our rivers and everything that depends upon them,



Tom

Tom Cormons
Executive Director

Become a member of Appalachian Voices.

Take part in creating a healthy, sustainable Appalachia where all of our communities can thrive. **Join today.**



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The Appalachian Voice Celebrates 30 Years

By Molly Moore, Editor

The first issue of *The Appalachian Voice* went to press in early 1996 — a bootstrap operation initially produced by the Sierra Club’s Southern Appalachian Highlands Ecoregion Task Force. Anthropologist and activist Harvard Ayers led the task force and served as publisher, and journalist Nathaniel “Than” Axtell was the first editor.

As it does today, the publication investigated the environmental harms facing the people of Appalachia, prioritizing the voices of residents harmed by destructive industries, while also celebrating the region’s culture and natural wonders.

During the first year of publication, Ayers and Axtell recognized the need for a regional advocacy organization

to tackle the environmental problems covered in the paper. In 1997, the organization Appalachian Voices received its nonprofit charter, starting in Boone, North Carolina, with two employees.

Today, as Appalachian Voices approaches its own 30th anniversary in 2027, the organization has grown to a staff of 45 and has expanded with offices in Knoxville, Tennessee; Charleston, West Virginia; and Charlottesville and Norton, Virginia. (Read more about the organization on page 31.)

Over the decades, hundreds of contributing writers, photographers, interns and volunteers supported a lean staff in creating and distributing each issue of *The Appalachian Voice*. Fueled by passion for our stories, a commitment to accuracy, and a fair amount of

caffeine, the team published roughly six issues per year through early 2020. By then, more than 200 volunteer distributors across seven states were delivering approximately 450,000 copies annually to newsstands, coffee shops, libraries, grocery stores and more.

The coronavirus pandemic put an abrupt halt to the print operation, as distribution locations closed, readers and volunteers stayed home, and advertisers faced uncertainty. *The Appalachian Voice* continued to periodically publish new articles online, while the Appalachian Voices organization grew and directed more communications resources towards advocacy.

Starting in 2023, *The Appalachian Voice* has brought back one special print edition each year to complement the

articles at AppVoices.org/Voice.

As we enter our 30th year, we regularly publish new articles online and are now adding audio stories into the mix. Sharp-eyed readers will also notice a fresh logo on the cover of this year’s edition, as we enter a new decade with an updated look.

We look forward to our next 30 years of bringing you news and stories that highlight underreported issues affecting Appalachia’s land, air, water and communities — and celebrate our region’s character, beauty and natural treasures.

To sustain *The Appalachian Voice*, become a member of Appalachian Voices at AppVoices.org/donate. You can also have new articles delivered to your inbox by signing up for free at AppVoices.org/subscribe. ♦

Proposed US Forest Service Reorganization Brings Uncertainty

By Jen Lawhorne

The U.S. Forest Service is proposing a major restructuring that would consolidate offices and close 57 of its 77 research stations, including several in Appalachia. The proposal includes moving the agency’s headquarters from Washington, D.C., to Salt Lake City, which critics say will cause many career staff to leave. USFS also plans to close nine federal regional offices and replace them with 15 state-based field offices, mostly in Western states.

Under this proposal, the Southern Appalachia office in Athens, Georgia, would oversee forests in North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky and Virginia. The states of West Virginia, Ohio and Pennsylvania would join others under the Mid-Atlantic office in Warren, Pennsylvania.

The changes at the Forest Service, which manages 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands, could have major local impacts, especially in regions where public lands are central to outdoor recreation, the economy and water quality.

The restructuring could also change staffing in the region, with some jobs expected to move. Understaffing is already a concern — more than 5,000 Forest Service employees either left or were fired in early 2025.

Research sites in Princeton, West Virginia; Blacksburg, Virginia; and Lexington, Kentucky, are among those announced for closure. In Blacksburg, Virginia Tech houses a coldwater fisheries team and in Lexington, the University of Kentucky is home to the Forest Health Research and Education Center. The

Wood Education Resource Center is in Princeton.

Critics warn that reductions to the agency’s 1,500 research scientists or research capacity could weaken the agency’s ability to study climate change, wildfire risk, drought and other forest management challenges.

“The reorganization does not eliminate scientific positions, cancel research programs, or reduce our national research footprint,” said a USDA spokesperson. “In many locations, ‘closure’ refers only to individual buildings currently housing small teams. Staff and programs will continue their work, relocated into fewer facilities while maintaining research presence across the country.”

The spokesperson also emphasized that the proposals are not final.

Timber industry groups like the American Forest Resource Council applaud the overall proposal, saying strong partnerships between the Forest Service and individual states are the best way to manage millions of acres of federal land. But others, like the Society of Outdoor Professionals, argue that shifting more responsibility to states and reducing the federal role could open the door to privatization of public lands, as some states lack the funding, staff and expertise to manage and protect public lands effectively.

A press release from Public Employees for Environmental Ethics stated that, “Rather than streamlining the agency, these moves may render it less capable of addressing growing threats to forest health from wildfires, diseases, and the effects of climate change.” ♦

Noquisiyi Mound Returns to Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians

In early 2026, the Noquisiyi Mound, a sacred and historically significant Cherokee site in what is now Franklin, North Carolina, was deeded back to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

Since the early 1800s, the mound had been owned by the city of Franklin or private landowners.

The mound was returned to the tribal government with the help of the Noquisi Initiative, a nonprofit focused on preserving Cherokee history in the area. In January, the Franklin City Council

voted unanimously to return the mound. One month later, the deed was officially signed.

“While we celebrate today, we remain mindful that the work of land reclamation continues, including our ongoing efforts to protect and restore historic Cherokee lands and sacred sites in Tennessee,” EBCI Principal Chief Mitchell Hicks wrote in a social media post about the deed signing.

The mound is part of a cultural corridor, started by the Noquisi Initiative, to share Cherokee history in Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee. Currently, there are a few signs sharing the history of the



Principal Chief Mitchell Hicks describes the return of the Noquisiyi Mound as part of an ongoing effort to preserve Cherokee heritage. Photo courtesy of the Noquisi Initiative

mound and Cherokee presence in the area, and a learning center is planned for the site.

Read more at appvoices.org/noquisiyi-mound. — Debra Murray

Report Validates Some Community Concerns About Bristol Quarry Landfill

In late 2025, a federal agency released a long-awaited report about the air quality around the Bristol Quarry Landfill, managed by the city of Bristol, Virginia. For years, community members appealed to the city to do more to curb the now-closed landfill’s smelly emissions, and raised concerns about serious health impacts from long-term exposure.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry report found two chemicals — benzene and sulfur dioxide — were at levels high enough to potentially affect people’s health. It also found several odor-causing chemicals, including methyl mercaptan, a gas that smells like rotten cabbage, but the

agency doesn’t know enough about its toxicity to definitively say whether it is likely to cause health effects.

“I’m glad the community didn’t wait for this health report to begin advocating for the landfill crisis to be addressed,” says Becky Evenden of the nonprofit HOPE for Bristol, formed to help address landfill problems. “I also hope that this report is useful to other communities that experience the unfortunate circumstance of a smoldering or high-temperature landfill, to give them confidence that the exposures are not healthy and a basis to demonstrate the real harm.”

Read more at appvoices.org/the-beast-of-bristol — Abby Hassler

Federal Judge Strikes Down Pisgah-Nantahala National Forest Plan

In April, a federal judge struck down the U.S. Forest Service’s plan to expand logging in the Pisgah and Nantahala national forests, finding it violated the Endangered Species Act.

The 2023 USFS plan, more than a decade in the making, would have allowed five times more logging across the two forests, some of Western North Carolina’s most important public lands that cover more than 1 million acres. In 2024, a coalition of environmental groups represented by the Southern

Environmental Law Center sued, arguing the plan failed to account for habitat destruction that could push four endangered bat species closer to extinction.

Plaintiffs also said the plan ignored the loss of 187,000 acres of trees on public land during Hurricane Helene, and required major revisions. As a result of the ruling, the Forest Service must now manage the forests under its 1994 plan, which complies with the law. — Jen Lawhorne

Reducing Wildlife-Vehicle Collisions

Wildlife-related collisions are a major cause of human fatalities, wildlife deaths and property damage in West Virginia.

In 2025, a State Farm report analyzing 1.7 million auto insurance claims found that drivers in the state face a 1 in 40 chance of an animal-related collision.

“West Virginia continues to be the riskiest state for animal collisions and has held the top spot for more than a decade,” the report reads.

Animal welfare and safety advocates are asking lawmakers to establish a pub-

licly-funded program for wildlife crossings, allowing animals to travel without entering high-traffic roads — potentially saving lives.

In 2021, Congress created a \$350 million nationwide grant program over five years to construct overpasses, underpasses and fencing to reduce and prevent wildlife-vehicle collisions. The program is set to expire in September 2026, and advocates support a bipartisan bill to create a permanent \$200 million annual fund for wildlife crossings to expand on these projects. — Debra Murray

Restoring the Virginia Creeper Trail

Restoration work is underway on the popular Virginia Creeper Trail, a scenic, 34.3-mile recreational rail trail, after Hurricane Helene decimated the upper 17-mile portion between Whitetop Station and Damascus. The portion of the trail between Abingdon and Damascus remains open for visitors.

The storm severely damaged or destroyed many of the trail’s iconic railroad

trestles, destabilized pathways and clogged the area with debris.

In November 2025, the U.S. Forest Service awarded a \$240.5 million reconstruction contract to Georgia-based Kiewit Corporation. At press time, Kiewit’s website tracker reported the project at 20% complete. According to a statement from the Forest Service, the trail “will be available for public enjoyment in late 2026.” — Abby Hassler

Seed Swaps Save Veggies, Tradition

Seed saving is a long-standing tradition in Appalachia that preserves region-specific and heirloom plants and creates locally adapted seeds. Community members share these seeds at seed swaps across the region.

In April, hundreds of visitors attended the 14th Annual Appalachian Seed Swap at Pike Central High School in Pikeville, Kentucky. Attendees could purchase or swap seeds for a variety of plants, including heirloom tomatoes, white half runner beans, greasy beans and more.

“A lot of these seeds have been passed down for generations from these families in Appalachia, and it’s a way to help farmers and gardeners just grow food more suited to our land and our environment,” says Emily Davis of the University of Kentucky’s Pike County Cooperative Extension Office. “The event makes sure these unique plants are able to keep growing strong and being passed down, and also just keeping Appalachian traditions alive for the next generation.” — Debra Murray

Clogging Extraordinaire Arthur Grimes keeps on dancing

By David Brewer

In Boone, North Carolina, clogger Arthur Grimes has danced his own singular path all the way from his family home in the town's traditionally African-American Junaluska neighborhood to the most hallowed stages alongside roots music royalty.

Renowned for his high-energy, high-stepping clogging style, Grimes' dancing days began in earnest in the fall of 1975, after Grimes tried out for the Watauga High School football team. Clad in the requisite shoulder pads, spikes and Pioneer helmet, Grimes soon discovered one serious problem with his plans to shine under the Friday night lights as a football star.

"I was terrible!" Grimes says. "So I quit football — I was in the wrong thing. So I decided to teach myself how to buck dance on my mama's back porch. I'd go out there every evening after I quit football, and that was my practice. That's how I really got started."

His mother, Magnolia Grimes, was none too pleased with her son's decision to trade his spikes for tap shoes. One of eight children, Grimes says he drove her crazy experimenting with all sorts of clogging, buck dancing and flatfooting moves on the porch, dancing along to music by Flatt & Scruggs, Doc & Merle Watson and others.

"It got on my mama's nerves real bad," Grimes says. "She said, 'Have



Arthur Grimes shares the stage with Old Crow Medicine Show at Merlefest in 2024. Photo by Light Shifter Studios / Bryce Lafoon

you ever thought about going back to playing football?' It's because the taps — what makes the instrument so you can hear. That's what got on my mom's nerve the most, because I had jingle taps. They really make noise."

For the next three years, Grimes continued devoting hours each week to refining his hybrid clogging technique on that same back porch before venturing out to try his steps alongside live performing musicians. In 1978,

Grimes began going to Jim & Jennie's High Country Music Barn & Campground, formerly located in Avery County's Crossnore community, where live bluegrass and old-time music were featured regularly.

Bluegrass legends J.D. Crowe & The New South noticed Grimes' clogging during one of his early trips to Jim & Jennie's and welcomed him to share the stage with them. This memorable first time on stage for Arthur was a seminal experience that validated his many hours of practice and dedication.

"I got hooked up with J.D. Crowe and that's what started making me realize that bands appreciated the dancing a whole lot, if you could do it right," Grimes says. "That's what got me started in a way, and then that opened up my life, right there, I could actually do good things if I just stay focused. And that's why I just kept focused, focused, focused."

"And it paid off for me because I wanted to be seen. I wasn't there for the money, I was there for the enjoyment. And trying to make sure that people understood that this dance was not just for White folks — it was for anybody that wanted to learn how to do it, and to do it right!"

Two decades later, popular band Old Crow Medicine Show began their amazing journey from lean and scruffy King Street busking outfit to seasoned festival headliners and members of the Grand Ol' Opry, where Grimes

performed with them last December. Grimes first ran into the group in downtown Boone in 1999, and they became fast friends, as their raucous old-time repertoire provided the perfect soundtrack for his signature clogging moves.

Grimes, 68, says he's extremely grateful that Old Crow has continued to feature him as their guest, even as their star has continued to rise. He joined them again at their recent sold-out Appalachian Theatre performance in March, and gave what he called his "farewell MerleFest performance" on the Watson Stage in 2024 — though festivalgoers were delighted, if not surprised, to see him dancing again this year. Grimes' clogging moves have also brought crowds to life alongside other standout roots artists, including the Carolina Chocolate Drops and the Steep Canyon Rangers.

Practically a fixture in downtown Boone for the last 30 years, Grimes is still all about the music. Last year during the town's Boonerang Music & Arts Fest, he was spotted busking as a percussionist, playing the washboard alongside a group of young pickers.

"Well, me being around the music that I've been around — that put me around the best people I could ever have met in my life," Grimes says. "Why, if you get in and just focus on those three things — focus on music, theater and dance — it took me to a different level. And I wanted to stay focused on that through my whole life." ♦

Percussion, Dance and Gathering: Clogging in Appalachia

Sharp taps, clicks and frequent heel-toe movements against the floor create a tap-click sound, as banjo or fiddle play alongside the percussive footwork of Appalachia's traditional lively clogging.

Established in the Appalachian Mountains, clogging is a style of dance where the dancer's footwear is used percussively by striking the heel, the toe or both against a floor or on another to create audible rhythms. Clogging is commonly danced to tunes that feature Celtic-like fiddles as well as banjos, which originated in West Africa.

"It's really a combination of old-style Irish dancing and West African dance that came together over a long period of time," says Julie Shepherd-Powell, associate pro-

fessor and graduate program director of Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University. "Both of those sort of serve the foundation of Appalachian percussive dance."

Clogging in Appalachia blends traditions from cultures into a dance that brings people together. Community dances were originally held in people's homes, with furniture pushed to the sides of the room to create a dance floor. Later, dances and competitions were held at community centers and dance halls.

Clogging is the official state dance for both Kentucky and North Carolina.

This style of dance still thrives today and can be found at various festivals, including mountain dance and folk festivals — and often in the audience at bluegrass and old-time

Members of the FiddleKicks dance in a circle while other members play the banjo, guitar, fiddle and cello. Photo courtesy of the FiddleKicks



music jams. Groups like the Green Grass Cloggers, J Creek Cloggers, Cane Creek Cloggers and FiddleKicks are keeping the tradition alive, with dance studios offering instruction to kids and adults alike.

"I think it's really important, because it shows just how much people value com-

munity in Appalachia and coming together," Shepherd-Powell says. "Despite the fact that we live in a time where you can basically never go out and interact with anybody, people still do it because it's so important to the community." — Debra Murray



Hiking the Highlands

On the Trail of Songbirds in Appalachia

By Debra Murray

From dense forests to fields, and from water-fronts to high elevations, Appalachia offers the chance to see many beautiful birds, such as the red-cockaded woodpecker, cerulean warbler and Eastern phoebe.

“Spend lots and lots of time outdoors,” Guy McGrane, vice president of the High Country Audubon Society, advises new birders. “Get a pair of binoculars, and whenever you see something move, pay attention to it. Pay less

attention to people and more attention to your surroundings, and you'll see lots of cool stuff.”

McGrane has been birding since 2013, mostly near his home in Boone, North Carolina. His personal favorites to spot are large birds such as the bald eagle and great blue heron, but he also enjoys seeing the “jeweled” ruby-throated hummingbird.

Experienced and new birders alike can spot a variety of feathered friends on these trails.

A male and female pair of Northern bobwhite quails. Photo by Steve Maslowski courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



North Carolina

Black Balsam Knob via Art Loeb Trail

Length: 1.4 miles, out-and-back

Difficulty: Moderate

Birds to spot: Black-throated green warbler, peregrine falcon, Carolina chickadee, black-capped chickadee



The view from the top of Black Balsam Knob. Photo by Darrell Moore on Unsplash

Black Balsam Knob via Art Loeb Trail in Pisgah National Forest is a moderate hike due to a 350-foot elevation gain. When hiking this trail on a clear day, it is possible to see the Great Smoky Mountains in the distance. Hikers are likely to see mountain birds soaring on this trail, as well as stunning views.

Pisgah National Forest works with the North Carolina Wildlife Resource Commission to support healthy populations of ruffed grouse and wild turkeys, Adam Rondeau, public affairs officer for National Forests in North Carolina, explains.

“Black Balsam Knob and other

high-elevation areas of the Pisgah Ranger District are especially popular for birding in the spring and fall, when migrating warblers move through the region,” Rondeau says. “Visitors can expect to see a variety of these colorful species along with other birds adapted to the high-elevation ecosystem.”

One notable bird spotted on the trail is the peregrine falcon, a fast flier that can soar up to 69 miles-per-hour when in pursuit of prey, according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Parking is limited at the trailhead. Thanks to its access to high-reward views on a shorter hike, it is a popular trail in the area, so get there early. ♦

Tennessee

Bobwhite Accessible Trail at Seven Islands State Birding Park

Length: 1.8 miles, out-and-back

Difficulty: Easy

Birds to spot: Northern bobwhite quail, pileated woodpecker, Eastern bluebird, great blue heron

At Seven Islands State Birding Park, the Bobwhite Accessible Trail is a short, ADA-compliant paved trail known for wading birds and a bridge that leads hikers over the French Broad River to an island.

The park's signature species is the Northern bobwhite quail, the only quail native to Tennessee, and the focus of the park's conservation management efforts. Populations have declined by 81% between 1966 and 2019, according to the American Bird Conservancy.

“We have over 10 miles of trails that go through a variety of different habitats, from grasslands to forests to wetlands, and we manage those specifically for the Northern bobwhite quail,” says Stephanie Mueller, park ranger at Seven Islands State Park. “But in the process, we end up managing for a lot of other bird species and wildlife.”

The park has around 200 bird species documented. Some are residents, and others are transient migrants passing through.

At Seven Islands State Park, visitors can watch bird banding every two weeks on Sunday mornings. Bird banding is how bird researchers work to track, study and protect bird populations by capturing and marking them with aluminum leg bands.

West Virginia

Endless Wall Trail

Length: 4.8 miles, out-and-back

Difficulty: Moderate

Birds to spot: Bald eagle, turkey vulture, hawk, ovenbird, cerulean warbler

Located in New River Gorge National Park, the Endless Wall Trail has an elevation gain of nearly 430 feet. Visitors wander through mature hardwood and hemlock forests and alongside cliffs, with views of climbers and the sounds of wood thrushes and ovenbirds. Turkey vultures and hawks can be seen soaring below when looking over the cliff's edge.

“[New River Gorge has] got great birding, especially in the spring and summer,” says Katie Fallon, executive



The Endless Wall Trail is located in the New River Gorge National Park. Photo courtesy of John Chapman and the National Park Service

director of the Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia. “There are a lot of breeding bird species — neotropical migrants — that nest and raise their young in the New River Gorge National Park. And there are a ton of trails.”

Fallon's favorite bird to spot is the cerulean warbler, a tiny songbird with

a blue back and white throat and underbelly.

“West Virginia has more breeding cerulean warblers than any other state,” Fallon says. “So it's always exciting to see them [while] out hiking. They are a bird that

likes mature to old-growth forests, hardwood forests, often on ridges.”

Parking frequently fills up at the nearest trailhead, Fern Creek Trailhead, so be prepared to possibly park a half a mile away at the Nuttall Trailhead. ♦

Continued on next page

Birding: Tennessee

Continued from previous page

able for free with a reservation and can navigate all the trails throughout the park. Mueller shares that people have found them to be very comfortable and have left positive comments about using them.

“Accessibility is a big thing with Tennessee state parks,” Mueller says. “We want to make as much of the outdoors as accessible as possible to folks.” ♦

Kentucky

Bluegrass Overlook Trail

Length: 1.9 miles, out-and-back

Difficulty: Moderate

Birds to spot: Vulture, Eastern phoebe

Located within the Berea College Forest, the Bluegrass Overlook Trail — previously known as the Indian Fort Overlook Trail — is a 1.9-mile hike with a 547-foot elevation gain, leading visitors to a lookout with views of forested valleys. Birds that visitors may spot include breeding songbirds, migrating birds, and vultures in the forest or cir-



The view from the top of Bluegrass Overlook during early spring. Photo by Debra Murray

cling near the valley.

In spring, visitors can spot the Eastern phoebe, a small songbird that breeds in this region of Kentucky. The Eastern phoebe is a plump bird with brown or gray feathers on its back and head, and white around the neck and

stomach. Their songs sound like “fee-be” repeating over and over again.

To avoid slipping on steep slopes, it's best to hike this trail when the ground is dry. There is also a large gravel parking lot and bathrooms at the trailhead. The parking lot gate closes after sundown. ♦

Ohio

Buzzardroost Rock Trail

Length: 4.6 miles, out-and-back

Difficulty: Moderate

Birds to spot: Turkey vulture, black vulture

Located in the Edge of the Appalachian Preserve, Buzzardroost Rock Trail guides visitors to giant limestone monuments and offers views of vultures that the trail is named after. On the trails, visitors gain roughly 450 feet in elevation while enjoying breathtaking views from the overlook platform, which offers a panoramic view of Southern Ohio and the Appalachian Mountains.

In addition to the signature



Visitors might catch a glimpse of a soaring turkey vulture from the peak. Photo by Shlomo Shalev on Unsplash

vultures soaring along the trail, birds such as black-and-white warblers, American redstarts and other songbirds can be spotted throughout the spring and fall months.

There is free parking in a gravel lot near the trailhead. ♦

Virginia

Ivanhoe Birding Trail

Length: 2.5-mile network

Difficulty: Easy

Birds to spot: Tufted titmouse, dark-eyed junco, bald eagle

Located on 55 acres within New River Trail State Park, the Ivanhoe Birding Trail opened in 2024. It features signage about birds that can be found in the wetlands, hardwood forest and shrubby fields that visitors walk through. Hikers may get the chance to sight the bald eagle, the dark-eyed junco and the tufted titmouse, a small, gray songbird with an echoing voice. A song that sounds like “peter-peter-peter” means a tufted titmouse is near.

The park offers nature backpacks



A man birdwatches on the Ivanhoe Birding Trail. Photo courtesy of Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation

that families can check out through a partnership between Virginia State Parks and the Library of Virginia. They contain pocket guides for exploring local wildlife, animal tracking tools, binoculars and magnifying glasses. Each backpack comes with a parking pass that allows the patron to visit any state park for free, according to the library's blog.

On-site parking for the state park costs \$7 per standard vehicle per day, and nearby restrooms are available. Visitors will need to walk from the main parking lot to the Ivanhoe Birding Trail. ♦

Advice for new birders

Birding is the observation of birds in their natural habitat. For first-time birders or long-time bird enthusiasts, here are a few tips from Katie Fallon, executive director of the Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia, to keep in mind before hitting a trail.

Bring binoculars, a guidebook, a pen and a notebook! Find a pair of binoculars that is lightweight and easy to carry on hikes. The West Virginia Division

A prothonotary warbler perches in a tree at Seven Islands State Birding Park. “They look like a little lemon with wings,” says Kelly Fox, the park's avian biologist. Photo by Kelly Fox

of Natural Resources also suggests writing down a bird's features to help identify it. Pay attention to the color and markings, size and silhouette, calls and songs, and habitats and behaviors. Fallon advises new birders to purchase bird guides for the region or that specific park, if available, to research ahead of time.

Download eBird! This free app, managed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, allows users to research birds, view species maps and post their sightings.

“If you want to know where the birding hot spots are, getting on eBird is incredibly useful,” Fallon says. “It allows you to log birds that you see in a certain

location, and it can also track your movements.”

Download AllTrails! The popular hiking app allows users to track their hikes and find hikes that have reported bird sightings. Users can also create lists of hikes they would like to do in a specific area or to see a specific kind of bird. App subscriptions start at \$2.99/month.

Join a local birding group! Learn more and become familiar with less common trails by meeting other people who like birding, too. Some groups host monthly hikes or activities and provide other opportunities to get involved.



Creating New Appalachian Monuments

Monuments Across Appalachian Virginia is ‘expanding the idea of what a monument can be’

By Dan Radmacher and Rance Garrison

On a beautiful late-April evening in Pound, Virginia, residents came together for the unveiling of a monument to the town’s labor history. There was live music and dancing, speeches from local leaders and union officials, remarks from the artists working on the monument, and food from Chef Torrece “Chef T” Gregoire’s team.

Residents and local leaders have been working hard to bring new life to Pound’s historic downtown through a series of projects grounded in the needs of the community and informed by feedback from the people who call Pound home. While many of these longer-term projects have been focused on building Pound’s resilience against natural disasters and improving rundown buildings, this project is a celebration of Pound’s labor history.

In 2025, Pound received funding from Monuments Across Appalachian Virginia to create a labor-oriented monument downtown. MAAV is a three-year project funded by a \$3 million grant provided by the Mellon Foundation and hosted by Virginia Tech. It features nine monuments that explore a variety of the region’s stories. The monuments take a number of forms: traditional statues, a children’s book, an album and a music festival, a quilt and more.

According to the initiative’s webpage, it aims “to reclaim, imagine, document, reinterpret, display and amplify histories and experiences that highlight collective struggles for the vitality of people and our shared environment, especially by, for, and with people whose stories have been silenced, denied or excluded.”

Pound community members were deeply involved in shaping the design and decision-making process for the monument. They participated in listening sessions where residents brought photographs, stories and memories to share with the two artists tasked with working on the project — Nashville-based Dana Jo Cooley and Johnny Hagerman, a Tazewell County, Virginia, artist who teaches brick sculpture at Southwest Virginia Community College

in Cedar Bluff.

The town has partnered with Appalachian Voices, the organization that publishes *The Appalachian Voice*, on landslide mitigation and an effort to revitalize blighted buildings. Pound is also collaborating with Appalachian Voices through the Community Strong initiative, a partnership with local residents and governments to develop community-based resilience projects in Pound and four other small communities in far Southwest Virginia.

Plans for the monument work in tandem with other Community Strong initiatives, such as creating a pocket park on the site of the former People’s Bank building, which was demolished in January 2025.

Feedback from Pound residents collected during the Community Strong listening sessions and town council meetings indicated early on that the monument should not be what some residents called a “pointless” structure with limited use, but rather a central focal point of the pocket park currently in development. As such, the monument will serve as a stage and performance space, hopefully creating momentum around the new community-gathering area at the former People’s Bank location.

“I come from an art background,” says Sarah Plummer, a Virginia Tech post-doctoral associate who leads the project’s monument audit team. “I’m excited about nontraditional monuments, about expanding the idea of what a monument can be.”

At its unveiling, the monument was not completely finished due to unanticipated delays, with about one-half of the stage’s back wall completed, including the stained-glass centerpiece. The other half was temporarily filled with artwork by local schoolchildren.

In addition to being a beautiful piece of public art, Pound Vice Mayor Leabern Kennedy hopes the monument and park will be a huge asset to downtown Pound’s economy, providing a much-needed local gathering space for festivals, concerts, a farmers market and local food truck rallies.



The Lua Project performs at the Blue Ridge Montañas Festival in September 2024. The festival was part of a monument to the Hispanic heritage of Luray, Va. Photo: MAAV

Montañas Reimagined

In Luray, Virginia, a monument to the Hispanic heritage of many of the town’s residents takes the shape of Montañas (“Little Mountains”) Reimagined, a music festival that organizers hope will be an annual event. The project also includes an album of “Mexilachian” music produced by the local musical group the Lua Project and an educational curriculum for schoolchildren.

The Lua Project’s Estela Diaz Knott grew up in Luray with Amy Azano, director of the Virginia Tech Center for Rural Education. Their parents kept them updated on what both women were doing after they grew up and moved away — and kept urging them to reconnect.

The Lua Project grew out of Knott’s desire to create a new style of music that married both sides of her heritage. Knott’s mother is from Mexico — the first Mexican to live in Luray, according to Knott. Her father is White. They married in 1967, shortly after the Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court ruling legalized interracial marriages.

When Knott was young, her mother would host community fiestas, first in

their church basement, and later, when the gatherings grew larger, at the local Veterans of Foreign Wars post.

When Azano reached out to her about Monuments Across Appalachian Virginia, “I started to think about, what if we brought that back?”

For the Lua Project, Knott liked to write songs based on the experiences of people around her. She wondered if that could become a type of monument.

“What if we did some interviews and took some oral histories of people in the Shenandoah Valley, and those would inspire some songs?” she says. “We ended up with a whole album and performed those songs at the festival in Luray.”

That festival, like her mother’s community fiestas, was held at the VFW, the community partner for the project.

“Back then, there was a lot of change going on,” Knott says, referring to her mother’s fiestas in the early ‘80s. “There was a lot of racism at the time. With the VFW, you’re talking about veterans who traveled all over the world. They were a lot more accepting than others, especially at the time.”

Continued on next page

Monuments

Continued from previous page

'Untaught and untold'

In January 2026, members of the Raising the Shade project unveiled a monument in Rocky Mount, Virginia. The project was the culmination of an 18-month effort to research the 70 Black men from the rural Virginia town who signed up to fight in the Union Army during the Civil War, and to engage with the community about their history.

"We knew that this was information that has been untaught and untold," says Glenna Moore, spokesperson for Raising the Shade. "I'm 73 years old, and the Virginia history book that I was taught from had no mention of the U.S. Colored Troops."

Community engagement in the project planning process was vital for Eric Anspaugh, president of the Franklin County branch of the NAACP.

"Education: That's been the real key," he says. "We worked at that in a number of ways. We've engaged with probably close to 50 groups and organizations — social, religious, for-profit, nonprofit — where we've made presentations."

The full title of the project is "Raising the Shade, Franklin County 1850-1910."

"That time frame is important," Anspaugh says. "It captures what we know historically about the time leading up to

and during the Civil War and that first bit of reconstruction."

They worked with Virginia Tech's Plummer to find out what they could do about the soldiers and their fates. The histories for each soldier are on the project's website.

Only one of the soldiers who survived the war returned to Franklin County: Corporal George Holland. Census records from 1870 show him living on a Rocky Mount farm with a wife and three children. By 1880, his family had grown to eight children. In the 1910 Census, they were living on the same farm. Six children and nine grandchildren lived with them.

"This research confronted us with what life was like before and after the Civil War for these men," Plummer says. "It was a glimpse of this time period that we don't always get unless it's in a sanitized or distant way. Seeing what life was like for the more average African-American man trying to make a living after the war was surprising and challenging for students."

The powwow is the monument

Another project is called the Yesáh Community House, but faculty coordinator Jessica Hernandez says that although the building is important, it isn't the actual monument for the Monacan Indian Nation.

"The monument in this project isn't the actual structure, it's the powwow," she says. "It's them finally practicing their culture on their land."



The base of this statue in Rocky Mount, Va., is inscribed with the names of 70 Black Union soldiers from the town. Photo by Dan Radmacher



Stained-glass art, representing a nearby tunnel once used by coal trains, centers the new stage being built in Pound, Va. The stage will serve as a monument to the town's labor history as well as a local gathering place. Photo by Kara Dotten

The Monacan Indian Nation has been hosting an annual powwow — a two-day celebration of Monacan culture and history with storytelling, song and dance — for 30 years. But with long-sought federal recognition of the tribe in 2018, the tribe was able to purchase the 1,300-acre Laurel Cliff property in Amherst County, Virginia.

"For the Monacan people, this project will serve to elevate and preserve our oral histories — traditionally shared through storytelling, song and dance —

to ensure that nothing more is lost for future Monacans," collaborators wrote on the project website.

The 33rd annual Monacan Indian Nation Powwow will be held on June 6 and 7, 2026.

"The work that we do has been rewarding and meaningful and difficult," Plummer says. "It's both exhausting and makes you ready to do more." ♦

Read or listen to longer stories about MAAV projects and the Pound monument at appvoices.org/thevoice.

Other Monuments Across Appalachian Virginia projects

- **23/54 Project: Celebrating Black Appalachian Community:** The project honors 23 parents who stood up for their 54 children's education in a legal case that was a precursor to the Brown v. Board of Education lawsuit that ended legal segregation in the United States. The Pulaski County, Virginia, monument is a community quilt.
- **Forest Botanicals Region Living Monument:** A living monument and sanctuary at High Knob near Norton, Virginia, to celebrate "the cultural, historical, medicinal and economic importance [of] Appalachian forest botanicals."
- **Green Pastures: A Sacred Place for African Americans in Appalachia:** The Green Pastures Recreation Area in Alleghany County, Virginia, was built in the

1930s for African Americans to use because the nearby Douthat State Park did not allow Black people. A children's book about the park is also planned.

- **Yesá:sahj Language and Sacred Places Project:** This project to revitalize the language spoken by Monacan, Tutelo and Saponi Tribes takes the form of a digital exhibit that features Yesá stories, art and traditional ecological knowledge.
- **The Travelers Inn: Black Appalachian History in Bluefield:** This project seeks to uplift Black Appalachian history, including the Travelers Inn. This historic lodge in Bluefield, West Virginia, that was listed in the "Negro Travelers Green Book," which helped Black people find accommodations in the Jim Crow-era South.

'The Speed of These Processes is Not Survivable'

A year and a half after Hurricane Helene, many survivors are still left in housing limbo due to bureaucratic hurdles and financial challenges

By Abby Hassler

A year and a half after Hurricane Helene, many survivors are still struggling to secure stable housing because of delayed federal funding, financial challenges and bureaucratic red tape.

In Asheville, North Carolina, Heather Laine Talley and her family lived in eight different places before settling in with her mother. Families are stuck in campers and RVs in Johnson County, Tennessee. Others, like Amalia Yosefa, a single mother, were approved for federal housing assistance — but only after dealing with months of frustration and uncertainty.

"People can't move — people can't restore housing, because they don't have enough resources to be able to do that," Talley says, highlighting her own situation. "We're sort of in limbo."

Common pain points with federal disaster aid

Disaster aid programs offered through the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other government offices are not designed to "make people whole," but rather serve as a "safety net," coming into play after insurance and after "personal resources have been expended," explains Andrew Rumbach, senior fellow at the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan think tank.

Common pain points for those seeking federal aid include difficulty accessing or providing required docu-

mentation, spending too much time filling out multiple applications across various programs, navigating unclear rules, and receiving funding too late to be helpful, according to Rumbach.

Programs are meant to move slowly to prevent fraud, but former Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem imposed an unprecedented layer of extra scrutiny that created a \$17 billion backlog in federal aid, later worsened by two government shutdowns. When people are trying to get back on their feet after Helene, the snail-paced, opaque process can feel maddening.

Talley says, "The speed of these processes is not survivable."

'The choices are impossible'

Talley's East Asheville home sits across the street from the Swannanoa River. Her residence was not destroyed, but many of her neighbors' houses on the other side of the road were washed downriver. One neighbor died. An elderly couple had to move away because their flood insurance payout barely covered the loss of their belongings, much less the cost of rebuilding their home.

Talley's family will not return to their home for many reasons, including the trauma of what they experienced there. The road leading to their home is still severely damaged, and public infrastructure in her neighborhood remains shaky.

"I don't know anybody who's been able to survive without a major, major supportive effort by somebody in their family," says Talley. "Everybody I know who's housed that has been displaced is only housed by way of someone in their family."

Talley and her partner purchased their home in 2012 — a far less costly housing market than it is today. That has been "a really rude awaken-

ing," she says.

"When we realized we couldn't go back to our house, we started to look around and see what our options were," Talley says. "And my partner turns to me at that point and said, 'Babe, we're priced out. We can't afford to live here anymore.'"

They have been approved through FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, which gives homeowners the option to sell their properties to local governments at pre-storm values. Local governments can then develop the property in ways that will reduce future storm losses. The program, like other FEMA programs, has faced significant delays.

While they wait, Talley and her partner continue paying a mortgage on a house they don't live in to avoid foreclosure, which would ruin their credit and hurt their chances of being approved for future loans or rental applications.

"The choices are impossible," Talley says. "And all of that is exacerbated because these processes are so slow."

'A little paranoid and not fully at ease'

In Fleetwood, North Carolina, floodwaters severely damaged Amalia Yosefa's basement, which houses her son's bedroom and her art studio — her primary livelihood.

Yosefa and her son continued to live there for about a year until it became clear that it was no longer safe to remain given septic tank damage, a leaking roof and a power surge that fried most of her appliances. They're now living with a family friend 45 minutes away.

To help repair her home, she applied for the state-operated Renew NC Single-Family Housing Program, which prioritizes low-to-moderate income families with children, seniors or people with disabilities. Renew NC is funded by a \$1.4 billion disaster recovery grant from the U.S. Department



During Hurricane Helene, Theo Crouse-Mann's home in Del Rio, Tennessee, suffered extensive flood damage from the French Broad River. Photo by Abby Hassler

of Housing and Urban Development.

As of press time, there were 3,063 active applications in various stages of the process and 43 homes had been completed. During an April 20 meeting, Stephanie McGarragh of the N.C. Department of Commerce reported that there were "insufficient funds" to serve every eligible applicant.

In the meantime, Yosefa's insurance company canceled her coverage because her home repairs were taking too long, so she has been unable to secure a home equity line of credit, a loan borrowed against a home's value that requires homeowners' insurance.

The biggest blow came in December 2025, when she received a letter stating that she had to repay the nearly \$7,000 she had received in FEMA assistance due to a "duplication of benefits gap," which had to be resolved before her application could move forward. She had received this money for repairs but had to use it to keep her family afloat.

"I had 30 days," she says.

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"You think your homeowner's insurance is going to help you," says Heather Laine Talley. "You think FEMA is going to step in and help you — that's not true. That's not true at all." Photo by Andy Feliciotti via Unsplash



Ready for the Next Big Storm? A practical guide to household preparedness

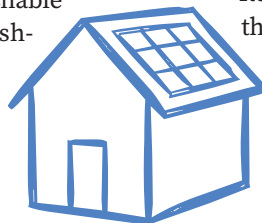


By Abby Hassler

Did you experience outages or other challenges from Hurricane Helene? Just want to feel more prepared for the next extreme weather event? Every home faces different risks depending on its structure, who lives there, its location and the local climate. But no matter your situation, you can still be prepared. Follow these simple tips to make your home safer and more resilient in the face of natural disasters or emergencies.

General household preparedness checklist

- Do you have the right insurance (homeowners, flood, wildfire, etc.)?
- Do you have a basic emergency supply kit to cover at least 72 hours (important documents, potable water, nonperishable food, essential medications, a flashlight, personal necessities, etc.)?
- Do you know how to escape the home during an emergency (fire escapes, window exits, etc.) and the locations of your nearest urgent care,



hospital, fire station and police station?

- Have you signed up for local weather-monitoring alerts?
- Do you have a battery-powered or hand-cranked emergency weather radio in case your cell phone doesn't work?

Know your specific weather and climate risks

From wildfires to flooding, it's important to know what the most common natural hazards are where you live, so you can prepare effectively. To determine your risk, use credible resources, such as FEMA's Flood Map Service Center or Resilience Analysis and Planning Tool. Here are a few tips:

- Keep water away from your basement or foundation with smart landscaping that can direct it away from your home.
- Clean leaves and other debris from your gutters at least twice a year.
- Remove highly flammable vegetation — anything dead or very dry and dying — and unhealthy trees against or near your home.
 - Cut down tree branches that might be hanging over or near your house.
 - Install storm doors or windows — they can also reduce heating and cooling costs!

Prepare for power outages

In the event of a power outage, it's important to have backup systems and tools in place. Having a gasoline, propane or solar-powered generator on hand can help keep essential appliances running or mobile devices charged for emergencies. Make sure you know how to safely operate your generator before an emergency strikes. If you are able, consider installing solar power with battery energy storage that can keep you online even when the grid goes down.

Other home upgrades

Extreme heat and cold are also worth preparing for. Consider conducting a DIY or professional home energy assessment to not only find ways to save money on your utility bills each month but also to stay safe during extreme weather conditions. Here are a few tips to consider:

- Locate and seal air leaks.
- Inspect insulation levels in your attic and basement.
- Upgrade to energy-efficient appliances and electronics.

Climate change is causing heavier precipitation, longer droughts and other extreme weather events, putting our communities at increasing risk. While we can't prevent the next storm, hopefully these steps can help you to feel more prepared. ♦

Off-Grid System Keeps Tennessee Couple Safe and Warm During Winter Storm Fern

At the end of January 2026, Winter Storm Fern brought freezing temperatures, ice and snow to much of the country, leaving more than a million people without power.

Joe and Sally Schiller have lived off-grid on 78 acres overlooking the Cumberland River in Montgomery County, Tennessee, since the mid-1990s. Today, they rely on a 12-kilowatt solar system — rooftop and pole-mounted — with 28.6 kilowatt-hours of fixed battery storage. An electric vehicle provides 84.6 kilowatt-hours of energy storage capacity, and the couple also has energy-efficient appliances, including a 1-ton heat pump for heating and cooling.

"In a sense, we were better prepared than many people, but it's not like you just sit back and hunker down and wait it out," Joe Schiller says. "It requires some — not just planning — but active strategies during [a storm]."

On Saturday, the first day of Winter Storm

Fern, they plugged their heat pumps into their fully charged EV so that the vehicle's battery could keep their heat running and conserve their use of solar-generated energy due to cloudy weather. Stubborn snow and ice limited solar production the following day, but by Monday, they had cleared enough from their arrays to recharge their batteries. By Tuesday, Schiller says they were "pretty much back in business."

"We never lost power," Joe Schiller says. "We always had power. We just had to be a little careful with it."

"Being careful" meant delaying the dishwasher and laundry for a couple of days, among other small changes.

Joe Schiller says they are "pretty spoiled," having watched many power outages in the region come and go over the years, only to cruise through relatively unscathed. Still, it requires discipline and strategic thinking about their energy usage



Joe and Sally Schiller didn't lose power during Winter Storm Fern thanks to their solar battery system and electric vehicle. Photo by Joe Schiller

and household preparedness.

"It's not that hard to do, though, once you have been through it a few times," he says. ♦

Building Community Resilience Hubs in Appalachia

By Abby Hassler

The term “community resilience hubs” is becoming more common lately, especially in Appalachia following extreme flooding from Hurricane Helene. But what are resilience hubs, and why are people talking about them?

At its core, a resilience hub is a trusted, community-serving space that connects people with resources and services — in good times and bad. In fair weather times, it may offer workforce development training or serve as a local gathering space. During disasters or emergencies, the hub can offer shelter, sustenance and access to communications, especially if it's prepared for power outages with portable or fixed renewable energy systems. It's not a one-size-fits-all solution, either, and each hub reflects the specific community it serves.

Many community resilience hub projects are underway around the region. Here are just a few in North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia.

\$5 million community resilience hub initiative in North Carolina

“What does resilience mean to you?” reads a sign hanging in Footprint Project's warehouse office in Mars Hill, North Carolina.

The New Orleans-based nonprofit distributes clean energy technologies to support immediate and extended recovery needs after a natural disaster. From Hurricane Helene to the Los Ange-



Above: One of Footprint Project's solar microgrid trailers, which offers 20 kilowatt-hours of storage capacity to sustain essential electrical loads during grid outages. Photo by Abby Hassler

les fires, Footprint Project equips people and groups with modular, solar-powered generators for rapid power needs, and with mobile and fixed solar systems.

Currently, the organization is co-leading a \$5 million resiliency project with Land of Sky Regional Council, a multi-county local government organization. This project is funded by the state through the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality. Other partners include Appalachian Voices, the publisher of this newspaper; Invest Appalachia, a regional investment fund; and the N.C. Sustainable Energy Association, a nonprofit clean energy group.

The goal is to equip approximately 24 community and first-responder hubs with microgrids consisting of stationary solar and battery storage systems in six Helene-impacted counties in North Car-



Above: “People are proud of their town,” says Mayor Melissa Gillenwater (right). She and the late Mayor Debra Horne (left) a driving force who helped lay the groundwork for the current community resilience hub, discussed the project at a community listening session. Photo by Michael Chassereau. Left: The old train depot is a gathering space. Photo by Andie Waugh



olina, and deploy two mobile microgrids for regional response in both western and eastern parts of the state. Award selections are being made in four rounds through mid-2026, and applications are required for consideration. As of press time in April, groundbreaking for the first round of sites is scheduled for May.

Dungannon's historic depot becoming a resilience hub

Home to about 270 residents within its town limits and no stoplights, Dungannon, Virginia, may appear to be “a one-horse town,” says Mayor Melissa Gillenwater, but it's so much more than that.

“Everybody knows everybody — everybody cares for somebody,” she says. “If something happens to somebody in the community, it seems like everybody's there rallying around to help.”

Now, the community has identified a new way to support one another: a resilience hub. The town is collaborating with Appalachian Voices, Tiger Solar, Invest Appalachia, American Microgrid Solutions, Google, and the Appalachian Solar Finance Fund to install 30.5 kilowatts of solar energy on its town hall and historic depot, and 115 kilowatt-hours of battery energy storage at the depot.

Currently, the old train depot serves as a community center, meeting location,

outdoor recreation space and library.

From snowstorms to heavy rains, the town deals with bad weather that brings power outages. With solar and battery energy storage, the depot can serve as a central location to recharge phones or oxygen machines and access emergency resources during grid outages, especially for the town's disabled, elderly and low-wealth residents.

But beyond emergencies, the depot will save the town money on its electric bill and provide a place for families to host birthday parties, for kids to play on the upgraded playground, and for town residents to commune with one another.

“We're just trying to make it a place where people can come back together in the community like they used to in the old days,” Gillenwater says. She hopes the hub will serve as a model for other towns in the region.

Bookstore co-op and hub adds on-site battery storage

Within 24 hours after Hurricane Helene, community members began gathering at Firestorm Books, a bookstore cooperative in Asheville, North Carolina.

“Everybody just knew that we were going to open our doors, and we were

Continued on next page



The Appalachian Solar Finance Fund provides financial and technical assistance for Central Appalachian solar projects. Eligible entities include nonprofit organizations, public institutions and certain local businesses.

Learn more at SolarFinanceFund.org

Resilience Hubs

Continued from previous page

going to support and participate in whatever organic community organizing and mutual aid was going to take place,” says Libertie Valance, a Firestorm Books staff member.

But despite having a 7.5-kilowatt solar system on its roof, the building was without power for several days because it was tied to the electrical grid, which went down. Initially, the team couldn't store perishable foods and temperature-controlled medications or charge power tools.

“We really lived out what resilience means during Helene,” Valance says.

This experience led Firestorm to seek out ways to add on-site battery storage to its existing solar system. The team connected with the nonprofit Footprint Project, which later donated a SolArk inverter and 20-kilowatt-hour battery. The Appalachian Solar Finance Fund, fiscally sponsored by Appalachian Voices, facilitated a no-interest loan from Invest Appalachia to support engineering and installation work completed by Asheville Solar Company.

For Firestorm Books, on-site energy storage isn't about saving money. Rather, Valance says, “The batteries are 100% about resilience and about the ability to continue operating, continue showing up for our community in the event that there is a disruption to the grid.”



“We're extremely aware that it's not just a question of how we access energy in a crisis,” says Libertie Valance, referring to how solar and battery storage allowed Firestorm Books to reduce its dependence on a nearby power plant relying on fracked methane gas. “It's also a question of how the production of that energy perpetuates future crises. I think it's really awesome when there's an opportunity to take an action that, in some small way, addresses both of those simultaneously.” Photos by Abby Hassler



West Marion resilience hub closer to a reality

The West Marion Resilience Hub is several steps closer to becoming a reality in McDowell County, North Carolina, thanks to the dedication of the team at West Marion Inc., the county's first and only Black-led nonprofit.

The nonprofit is seeking to transform the historic Mountain View School, a Black high school that closed its doors in 1966, into a 50,000 square-foot resilience hub. The space will offer a primary care clinic, childcare facilities, an event space, a Black history museum,

a community kitchen and more. It will be equipped with renewable energy and battery storage to keep the lights on and people safe during emergencies and extreme weather.

“[This project is] for everybody — everybody's welcome,” says Paula Swepson, executive director of West Marion Inc. “It's a legacy project.”

As of April, West Marion Inc. has raised \$800,000 toward the \$26 million redevelopment project. Additionally, US Bancorp is paying for new markets tax credit consulting services to spur further investment in the project. The New Markets Tax Credits program, managed by the Community Development Financial Institutions Fund out of the U.S. Department of the Treasury, leverages tax credits to spur private investment in distressed regions.

To receive the tax credits and move the project forward, West Marion Inc. is looking to raise \$15 million by the end of 2026.

Grassroots nonprofit bootstraps resilience hub in East Tennessee

After 15 years of operation, the grassroots organization Clean Water Expected in East Tennessee, or CWEET, will soon have a building to call home in Cosby, Tennessee. This space will double as a resilience hub for the community.

Top left: West Marion Inc. is hosting a monthly community resilience workshop series in partnership with Appalachian Voices at a community forum in Old Fort. “We want to hear everybody's voice,” Swepson says. “How can we all come together and make a better McDowell County? That's what we're trying to do.” Photo by Abby Hassler. Top right: Project rendering courtesy of West Marion Inc.

Left: While renovations of the CWEET building are ongoing, Deborah Bahr wants the space to be “immediately useful,” so CWEET has been holding meetings at a fire pit outside and using portable camp lights inside. Photo courtesy of CWEET/Christy Miller



CWEET received an outpouring of financial support after Hurricane Helene, but since the team is primarily volunteer-based, they turned to the community to ask how best to leverage some of the funding.

“Our main job has always been listening to the community,” says Deborah Bahr, facilitating director of CWEET. “And space is what they said they needed.”

A former family restaurant and gathering spot for over 50 years, the building had been dormant for several years before CWEET signed the mortgage in 2025. The team didn't have significant funding to renovate the space, so it's been a major bootstrapping operation, involving upcycling and scrounging for supplies, removing the old front porch, gutting the interior and installing a new roof, among other updates.

The final two hurdles that remain are reworking the electrical and plumbing systems. CWEET hopes to fundraise \$50,000 or more to cover these unexpected costs.

Once it's move-in ready, CWEET hopes to offer a gathering space, a community garden, a home-style kitchen, a free store, a library, skill-sharing and much more. In the future, the team hopes to install solar energy and backup energy storage for grid outages.

“We want to turn it into a land trust so that it's something that nobody can take from the community,” Bahr says. ♦

Rebuilding Roads and Rethinking Rivers

A tale of two rivers after Hurricane Helene

By Erin Savage

In September 2024, Hurricane Helene slammed into the Southeast, resulting in extensive flooding, landslides and treefall. The storm devastated human lives, homes, businesses, roads, thousands of acres of forest and many rivers.

While rivers in Appalachia are prone to more mild flooding, the changes some rivers experienced during Helene were beyond what many imagined possible. The storm filled rivers with debris, moved house-size boulders and, in some cases, even ripped off huge slabs of bedrock.

Following the storm, some rivers have continued to be significantly altered by reconstruction of highways, interstates and railways. Now, the fate of these rivers depends on what condition they are left in as recovery projects are completed.

The Appalachian Mountains are old mountains, worn by millions of years of erosion. This has left behind lush forests, clear water, and smooth, stable riverbeds perfect for recreation, as well as an abundance of biodiversity. Residents and tourists alike utilize many of the region's rivers for fishing, tubing,

paddleboarding, kayaking, rafting, swimming or hiking alongside. People visiting Western North Carolina to float a river contribute nearly \$40 million in economic impact to the region annually — and that's from an economic study back in 2017.

Here, human life is also often organized around rivers, and a large percentage of roads, highways, railways, powerlines and even town centers are located along rivers. Relocating infrastructure, even after a major flood, may not be possible due to the steep terrain.

Helene destroyed many roads across the region. Interstate 40 along the Pigeon River and Highway 74A through Bat Cave and Chimney Rock Village have been two of the most time-consuming rebuilding projects.

These two roads also include treasured recreational stretches of river. As recovery takes place, communities must grapple with how to balance repairing infrastructure, preserving and repairing the structure of these rivers, and protecting aquatic life.

The Pigeon River

The Pigeon River flows northwest from North Carolina to Tennessee through a deep river gorge and thick



Appalachian forests. Its most popular stretches for kayaking and rafting run alongside Interstate 40 in Tennessee, but maintain a wild feel due to the surrounding national forest and Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

The river flow in these stretches is controlled by a hydroelectric dam operated by Duke Energy. The company currently provides predictable recreational flows in the Pigeon Gorge, which contains friendly class III rapids perfect for commercial rafting. Multiple outfitters provide guided trips on this stretch.

The section of river at the North Carolina state line above the powerhouse, known as the Pigeon Dries, contains class IV and V rapids. The Dries are not boated commercially, but are a draw to private boaters around the region when heavy rains cause the dam to spill directly into this section.

Hurricane Helene damaged 11 miles of Interstate 40 along the Pigeon River in North Carolina and Tennessee. The North Carolina Department of Transportation estimates that 3 to 4 million cubic yards of material from the roadbed were washed into the river during the flood. Now, both states are undertaking a massive project to repair the interstate. The rebuild is scheduled to be completed

Kevin Colburn kayaks the Pigeon River in early 2026 alongside Interstate 40 construction. Photo by Erin Savage

by late 2027 in Tennessee and by late 2028 in North Carolina.

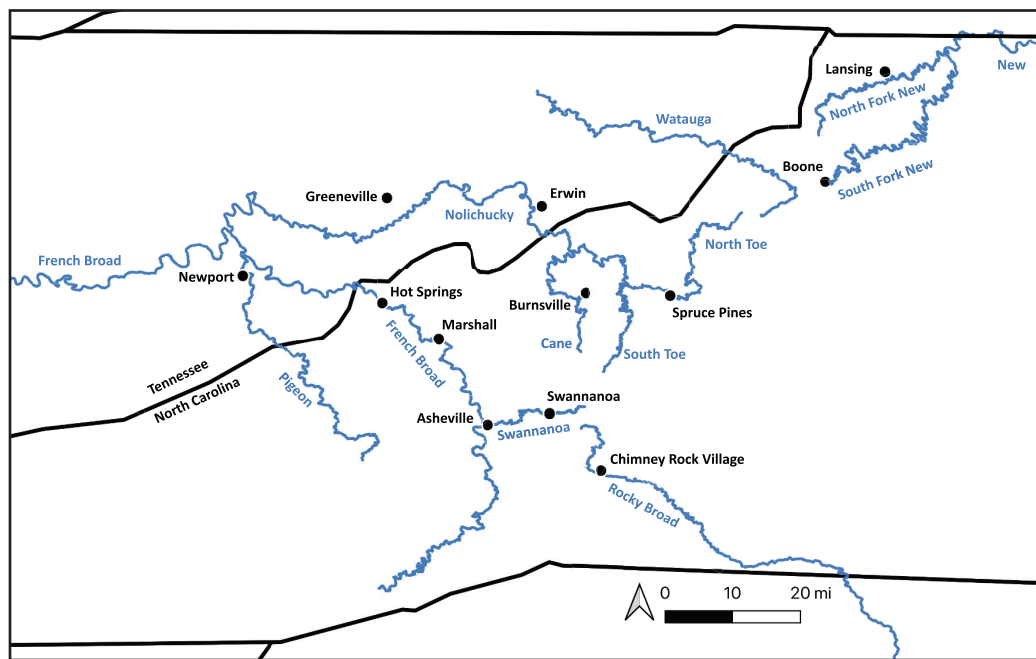
To conduct the project, a temporary access road was constructed in the river channel below the interstate. The access road has constricted the Pigeon by as much as 50% in some areas. Due to the need for fill material to rebuild the interstate, NCDOT has opened a rock mine alongside the river in Pisgah National Forest.

To offset the environmental impacts of the mining operation, NCDOT will improve low-water road crossings, construct wildlife crossings and purchase over 1,000 acres of land to be added to the national forest.

Despite the extensive construction activity alongside the river, commercial rafting resumed in 2025. The NCDOT constructed a new river access area about a mile downstream of the original put-in, which was located just below Duke's powerhouse.

While the river still has hydraulic features that make a raft trip exciting, it is clear that the riverbed and riverbanks will continue to change throughout the construction project. In some areas, fill material chokes the river bottom, taking away eddies good for both boaters and aquatic life.

"In that first mile of river, we lost all the rapids," says Steven Foy, general manager of outpost operations at the



Simplified map of major rivers in North Carolina and Tennessee that flooded significantly during Hurricane Helene. This map does not include all rivers where flood damage occurred. Map provided by Appalachian Citizens' Law Center

Continued on next page

River Restoration

Continued from previous page

Nantahala Outdoor Center, which runs raft trips on the Pigeon. “All along the 5-mile run, there were massive rocks that just disappeared. From a whitewater perspective, it’s not the same.”

Foy is hopeful that the state of Tennessee will identify funding to reconstruct in-stream features.

In addition to recreation, the Pigeon provides important habitat for native aquatic life. The upstream headwaters are home to the endangered Appalachian elktoe mussel, which has been found surviving in pockets of the West Fork of the Pigeon River after Helene.

Further downstream, where a now-closed paper mill and the hydroelectric dam impact the Pigeon, both North Carolina and Tennessee have had success in reintroducing a number of aquatic species, including fish and mussels.

The Pigeon River Gorge is also home to many land-based species. Advocates with the Safe Passage Coalition have worked for nearly a decade to secure safe wildlife crossings of I-40 in the Pigeon Gorge to protect bear, elk and other wildlife as well as drivers and passengers.

The coalition hoped that the rebuild would be an opportunity to improve wildlife crossing features, but federal reimbursement constraints may limit what is possible.

Though the rebuild will fix an existing wildlife crossing at an interstate-wide tunnel, the coalition argues that the massive retaining wall being installed



A temporary roadway along the Rocky Broad River, upstream of Chimney Rock Village. Photo by Erin Savage

and the failure to enlarge existing culverts will create ongoing dangers for wildlife in the gorge.

Kevin Colburn, national stewardship director for American Whitewater, is hopeful about the long-term future of the Pigeon River, both in terms of recreation and ecology.

“Success depends on what they leave behind when they leave the river,” Colburn says, referring to the need for each state department of transportation to have a clear plan for removing temporary roads and restoring natural river structure. He notes that rebuilding a natural riverbed creates variations in flow that provide good aquatic habitat, interesting recreational features and flood resilience all at once.

The Rocky Broad River

On the opposite side of the Eastern Continental Divide, the Rocky Broad River runs southeast toward the Atlantic. Unlike the Pigeon, there was no commercial rafting on the Rocky Broad. Before the storm, the steep, small riverbed was better suited to expert kayakers and canoeists. But the area does rely heavily on tourism — Chimney Rock State Park, Chimney Rock Village, rock climbing and fishing all draw large numbers of visitors. Hickory Nut Gorge, where the Rocky Broad lies, is steep and narrow. The highway ran right next to the river in many places, and commercial shops drew tourists with their riverside locations.

Located on the North Carolina Blue Ridge escarpment that separates the piedmont and the mountains, the Rocky Broad watershed received a massive amount of rainfall across all of its headwater streams during Helene. The floodwaters washed away many sections of highway through the gorge, as well as many bridges, homes and commercial buildings.

The North Carolina Department of Transportation has constructed a temporary road within the Rocky Broad River channel while the permanent road is constructed. The temporary road serves not only as a con-



A crew of volunteers works with Broad Riverkeeper David Caldwell to clean up trash along the Rocky Broad River. Photo by Erin Savage

River Cleanup of Helene Debris Continues

More than a year and a half after Hurricane Helene devastated communities across a swath of Appalachia and the Southeast, river recovery efforts are still underway. As the region continues to recover, a look at cleanup efforts in East Tennessee and Western North Carolina reveals lessons for improving the cleanup of public waterways after future floods.

“We knew that a federally funded effort would be necessary to remove the large debris, but we didn’t understand exactly how destructive that effort would be in terms of tear-

ing up river banks, and removing live trees and large woody debris,” says Gray Jernigan, deputy director and general counsel for MountainTrue, a Western North Carolina nonprofit.

MountainTrue has received \$10 million dollars in state funding and additional foundation funding, which has allowed the nonprofit to launch a massive river cleanup and restoration effort, hiring many displaced outdoor recreation workers.

Read more on river cleanup and debris removal at appvoices.org/helene-rivers.

struction access road, but also as a temporary public road for residents and visitors. In some places, the temporary road appears to travel directly down the middle of the riverbed, constricting the Rocky Broad to half its normal width on one side, and leaving large ditches on the other.

While the current road is temporary, here, too, it is unclear what condition the riverbed and riverbanks will be left in when the road is removed.

Local residents of Chimney Rock Village have a vision for the river and its banks when highway construction is complete. Following the storm, the municipality formed the Chimney Rock Village Task Force, composed of local leaders, residents, business owners and nonprofit staff. The task force held many meetings and two public workshops, and solicited expert analysis and planning from several design and en-

gineering firms. The work culminated in the Raise the Rock Recovery Action Plan. The comprehensive recovery plan includes a rebuilt and expanded riverwalk, as well as expert construction of in-stream features that could improve hydrology for both aquatic life and people enjoying innertubes, paddle boards and kayaks.

Road construction along both the Pigeon and Rocky Broad rivers will take several more years. Meanwhile, these rivers will continue to change, often slowly, and sometimes rapidly, as new floods occur.

If left alone, the rivers will heal from the storm and construction in time. But decision-makers, residents and state and federal agencies have a chance to speed recovery, both ecological and economic, if they consider how riverbed and riverbank areas are left after road construction crews are gone. ♦

OVERDRIVE

Fossil Fuels in Appalachia

By Molly Moore, Dan Radmacher, Jen Lawhorne and Abby Hassler

Electricity demand is on the rise. For 15 years, the nation's electricity usage remained fairly steady, but it started increasing around 2022. That upward trend is expected to continue, with some of it displacing other fuels, and some of it driven by new industries. How sharply will electricity demand rise? Who will pay for it? How much of that electricity will come from fossil fuels, renewables or nuclear? How will data centers influence all of the above?

These are huge questions, and the subject of intense debate. Their answers present real consequences for people across Appalachia and the Southeast — and for the future of our air, water and climate. Here, we share snapshots of the trends driving the debate, and explore how these energy issues are affecting our communities — and how people are pushing back.

For links to sources, visit appvoices.org/energy-overdrive.



Mountain Valley Pipeline wants to add huge compressor station

Operators of the Mountain Valley Pipeline are proposing to expand the pipeline's capacity with a project called MVP Boost. It would upgrade three compressor stations in West Virginia and build a huge new compressor station in Elliston, Virginia. Elliston's Swann Compressor Station would be enormous, the largest capacity station on the East Coast with 136,900 horsepower.

Crystal Mello, an organizer for the Protect Our Water, Heritage, Rights Coalition — who spearheaded much of the opposition to MVP's construction in Montgomery County, Virginia — is gearing up for another fight.

She has organized community meetings to inform local residents who are concerned about noise, light and air pollution from the compressor station, as well as the dangers of higher volumes of gas flowing through the pipeline.



Crystal Mello of the POWHR Coalition speaks to community members. Photo by Dan Radmacher

"Not only am I in a blast zone, but now you're going to poison me?" asks Penny Artis, who lives on the pipeline's path and less than a mile from the proposed compressor station.

TVA scraps Kingston and Cumberland coal plant retirements

In February 2026, the Tennessee Valley Authority Board of Directors scrapped plans to retire its Kingston and Cumberland coal plants, even as it constructs expensive methane gas power plants at the same sites. Previously, TVA justified its methane gas expansion in part by citing affordability and reliability concerns with keeping its aging coal plants online.

Community advocates are speaking out against this decision and the construction of methane gas pipelines. Construction is underway on the 122-mile Ridgeline pipeline that will supply the Kingston plant. Ridgeline Voices, a grassroots group fighting the pipeline, is conducting citizen water monitoring with other partners.

Barbara Miller played in the pristine waters of Bartons Creek in Dickson County as a child. Now, the 32-mile Cumberland pipeline runs through this creek bed. Tree removal along the banks has removed a natural filter for pollutants and may increase erosion. She's also worried about what could happen over time as the pipeline degrades.

In Cheatham County, community members — and a massive country music star — fought back against TVA's plans to build a methane gas plant and pipeline in their community and won.



Parallel pipelines, parallel problems

The Southeast Supply Enhancement Project and Mountain Valley Pipeline's Southgate extension pipelines threaten communities and the environment in Southern Virginia and North Carolina. The 31-mile Southgate and 54.8-mile SSEP would both begin in Pittsylvania County, Virginia. Southgate would end in Rockingham County, North Carolina, while the interstate



SSEP would cut through Rockingham, Guilford, Forsyth and Davidson counties, where six local governments have passed resolutions opposing the project or raising concerns about it.

Most of the SSEP's new pipe would be laid near or alongside existing Transco pipelines, and parts of the project follow a route similar to MVP Southgate. Residents in impacted counties are deeply concerned about the co-location of multiple high-pressure, large-diameter pipelines and the impacts on air and water quality, safety, property values and electric bills.

Both pipelines have received state and federal construction permits. Appalachian Voices, the publisher of this paper, is part of three lawsuits challenging MVP Southgate's federal and state permits. The nonprofit is also part of legal challenges to two federal authorizations for SSEP.

Hundreds of North Carolinians spoke out against the proposed SSEP at a public hearing in 2025. Photo by Jimmy Davidson

Data from MBA, Consumer Price Index, graphic by PowerLines. Learn more at powerlines.org/utility-bills-are-rising.



Fighting a new gas plant

Nebraska developer Tenaska plans to build a second, larger methane gas power plant in rural Fluvanna County, Virginia, across the road from its 1-gigawatt plant in operation since 2004. The proposed 1.5-gigawatt facility was approved by the county board of supervisors in March, despite the planning commission's prior vote to reject the plant and a groundswell of community opposition.

More than 1,300 people signed a petition urging county leaders to consider the health risks of the plant's air pollution and the impact of drawing millions of gallons of water daily from the nearby James River. Residents also challenged Tenaska's economic development claims, saying promised job creation is far lower than advertised. The project now moves to the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality for air permitting and further review.

ENERGY AFFORDABILITY & METHANE GAS

Electric bills and residential gas bills are outpacing inflation, straining wallets at a time when nearly 1 in 3 Americans report struggling to pay their energy bills, according to 2024 U.S. Census Bureau data. So why are residential electric bills going up?

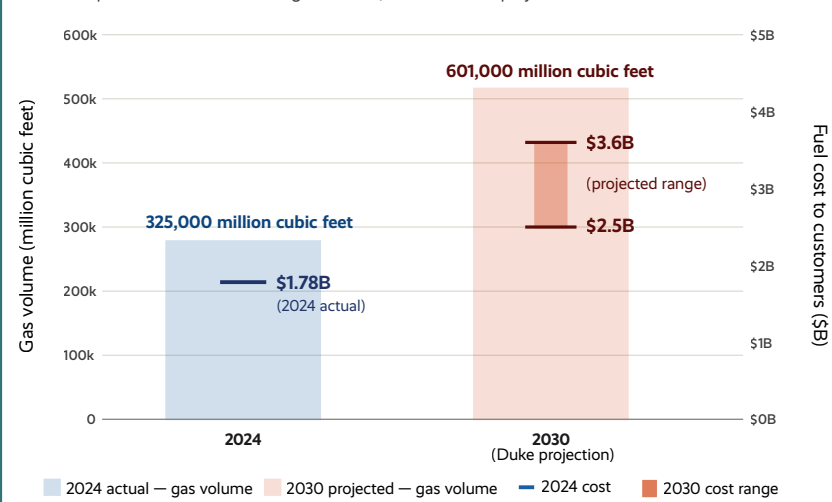
The answer is highly complex, and it looks a little different everywhere, but a recent report by the nonprofit PowerLines highlights four primary factors nationwide:

- Replacement of aging infrastructure
- Costs associated with extreme weather events
- Volatile fuel costs
- Increased demand for electricity*

Usually, when utilities want to raise electric rates for any of these reasons, they first need to get approval from state regulators. Infrastructure might need an upgrade, but is the utility's plan cost-beneficial for their customers, or does it pad the company's bottom line too much? Because utilities in the Southeast operate as monopolies — their customers can't choose their providers — there are checks built into the system that are supposed to prevent price gouging.

UNPREDICTABLE METHANE GAS PRICES

Fuel cost passed to customers and gas volume, 2024 vs. 2030 projection



Duke Energy's desire to increase methane gas use by 85% between 2024 and 2030 could cost its N.C. customers an additional \$700 million to \$1.82 billion every year. Source: Appalachian Voices intervention in 2023 Duke Energy Carbon Plan

*The PowerLines report explains that increased electricity demand is only driving up residential prices in specific circumstances. That's because some areas, like the Southeast, are seeing sharper growth, but it's also because decision-makers can design electricity rates to shield residents from paying for grid upgrades and other costs needed for high-load industrial customers like data centers.



The environmental costs of keeping coal plants running

Running coal power plants has consequences farther away. Point Lick Energy's Witcher Creek Surface Mine and Blue Creek Mining's Campbells Creek complex have supplied coal to the John E. Amos Power Plant in Winfield, West Virginia. In 2024, Point Lick Energy received approval to operate a new 850-acre mountaintop removal mine adjacent to the Witcher Creek mine, which discharges pollutants into Campbells Creek. Independent water monitoring conducted by Appalachian Voices has repeatedly found toxic levels of selenium in that waterway from the Blue Creek Mining operations.

Fuel costs contribute to higher electricity bills

Electricity costs and the reasons behind them can vary greatly.

As a public power provider, the Tennessee Valley Authority distributes electricity through local power companies, charging the ninth-lowest rates in the country. But Tennessee is one of the top five states in the country for residential energy use, due in part to poor energy efficiency and building standards. So while TVA's rates are relatively low compared to neighboring utilities, household electric bills are near the national average.

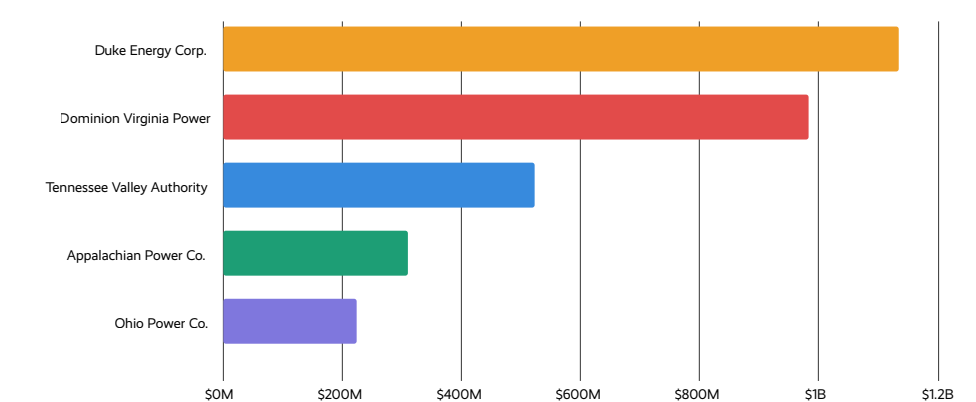
Swings in gas, coal and oil prices can lead to both unexpectedly high bills — like when TVA's fuel costs rose 66% between February and March — and temporary drops. Fuel costs make up a portion of the total bill.

New River Light and Power, an entity run by Appalachian State University that serves

the university and the town of Boone, North Carolina, raised bills 24% in March. NRLP has a contract to buy energy through a company that sources most of its energy from a gas plant in Kings Mountain, North Carolina. This gas plant also saw volatile market conditions for fuel costs, and the purchased power costs for NRLP increased by \$2.3 million, which was passed on to customers.

Electric bills for customers of Appalachian Power Company, which serves parts of West Virginia and Southwest Virginia, rose 48% between 2021 and 2025, far outpacing the post-pandemic inflation surge. In a report, advocacy group Clean Virginia cited more than a dozen reasons for ApCo's high costs, including overreliance on coal and gas, increasing transmission costs and regulatory systems that push too much of the cost onto residents.

Dollars Utilities Lost Burning Coal Instead of Cheaper Options, 2015-2025*



*Jan. 2015-Sept. 2025. Data reflects gross losses across each utility service area, often including multiple states. Analysis by RMI. More at utilitytransitionhub.rmi.org/economic-dispatch.

THE HIGH COSTS OF COAL

Utilities spent nearly \$18.5 billion more than necessary between 2015 and 2023 by choosing to burn coal for electricity when there were cheaper alternatives available, according to an analysis by the think tank RMI. Most of this extra cost was passed to customers.

In the past, coal was king. But for years, it's been more expensive than solar, wind and even methane gas when it comes to generating electricity. The grid works differently across the country and region, but usually, grid operators choose to run the most affordable energy option available. So why are customers being charged a premium for coal when cheaper options are available at the same time?

Power companies like Dominion Energy can preschedule their old, polluting coal plants to run instead of more affordable options already on the grid — and most regulators nationwide have

allowed them to pass those higher costs to customers. To lower bills and decrease pollution, Virginia passed a law in early 2026 that directs state regulators to hold utilities — instead of their customers — accountable for these decisions. Appalachian Voices championed this bill, and other states can follow suit.

The Trump administration is attempting to prolong the use of coal power. In February, the Department of Energy announced \$175 million to "extend the useful life" of six coal-fired power plants in Kentucky, North Carolina, Ohio and West Virginia. These include the John E. Amos power plant.

In April, the president invoked war powers to free up federal dollars for specific electric grid and fossil fuel projects, including coal mines and power plants.

DATA CENTERS & ENERGY DEMAND

Electricity demand is rising as more households and businesses switch to electric heating and transportation, along with industrial processes and manufacturing. The biggest wildcard? Large-scale data centers. There are wide-ranging estimates of how much power the facilities will demand.

Utilities point to sky-high electricity demand forecasts to justify building new, polluting methane gas power generation, branded as “natural gas.” But when forecasting energy demand 10 years into the future, utility companies overestimate future demand by 17% on average, according to a report by the think tank RMI.

Overbuilding could be happening now. Data center developers apply for electricity service in multiple utility areas, even when they only plan to build one project. There aren’t enough semiconductor chips to meet the projected demand, and new technology could improve efficiency. Local resistance is also halting some projects.

Despite these uncertainties, utilities and private methane gas companies want to build power plants now, using high-end demand forecasts as justification. Duke Energy is asking North Carolina regulators to approve 9.6 gigawatts of new gas by 2033 and 12.4 GW by 2040. Between 3.5 to 6.3 GW of that is linked to data centers,

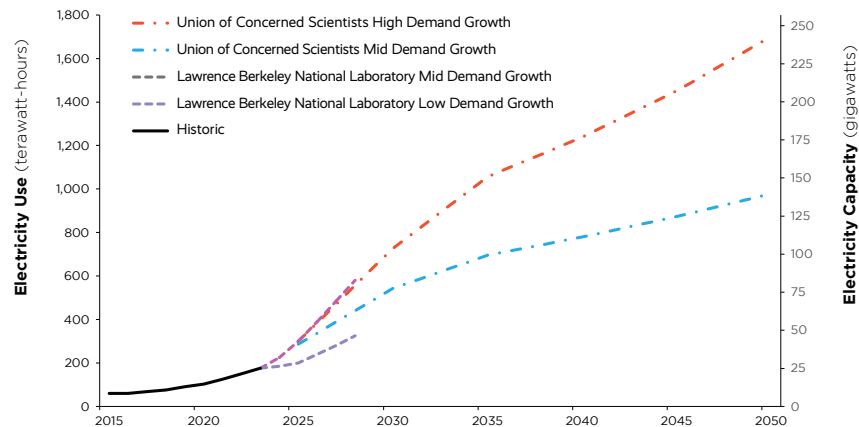
not replacing retiring coal units. At the same time, the company is asking to increase residential rates by 18%.

“Power companies are incentivized to exaggerate demand and potentially overbuild power plants and other infrastructure because it’s good for their shareholders, but we risk paying for unnecessary electricity infrastructure for decades,” says Appalachian Voices State Energy Policy Director Peter Anderson.

Plus, methane gas isn’t the only way to power the grid. Virginia has the highest concentration of large-scale data centers in the world, and state law requires carbon-emitting power plants to retire by 2045. Recent modeling shows multiple paths to meeting electricity demand without fossil fuels by 2045. When taking fuel costs into account, these carbon-free scenarios were cheaper than utility plans that included new gas-fired power plants. (See appvoices.org/va-2045)

Some data centers seek to skip grid interconnection by building their own methane gas power plants on site. Data centers would bear power generation costs, but communities would face increased air and water pollution. Cornell University found the rush to build new gas-fired generation for data centers could have about the same impact as 10 million more cars on the road.

U.S Data Center Electricity Forecasts



Union of Concerned Scientists and Lawrence Berkeley National Lab projected data center electricity use and capacity for industry high- and low-growth scenarios. Graph courtesy of Union of Concerned Scientists, ucs.org/resources/data-center-power-play

Reducing data centers’ impact on the grid

Virginia, home to 35% of the world’s hyperscale data centers, passed a law in 2026 that requires utilities to design demand flexibility programs for high-load customers like data centers. Participants would adjust their energy use during the hours of the year when electricity demand is at its peak to reduce the need for new power generation and other expensive infrastructure. Appalachian Voices, publisher of this newspaper, supported this bill and is advocating for additional guardrails on data center development.

Large-scale data centers also present their own environmental problems — they can consume vast amounts of water, and backup diesel generators increase air pollution. When data centers keep old coal plants running or help justify a new methane gas power plant, local air quality suffers. Communities are pushing back by opposing data centers outright or demanding robust community benefits, pollution controls, and other accountability and transparency measures.



Data center and power plant proposal deeply alarms residents of Tucker County, West Virginia

Tucker County, West Virginia, is a remote hot spot for outdoor tourism year-round — with ample options for skiing, mountain biking, hiking, birding and other activities. But a proposed data center complex of more than 10,000 acres, along with a methane gas plant to power it, has residents worried about the future of their paradise.

They formed Tucker United to oppose the massive power plant and data complex proposed by Fundamental Data. Developers told the Wall Street Journal it would be “among the largest data center campuses in the world.”

“This isn’t just a fight about a power plant and data center complex,” says Nikki Forrester, director of communications for Tucker United. “It’s a fight for our health, for our economy, for our clean air and water, and for our quality of life. This is a fight for our future.”

Tucker United and other groups appealed the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection’s approval of the project’s air pollution permits. As of press



Residents gather at Davis Town Hall after a poster-making party to protest the proposed gas plant and data center. Photo courtesy Tucker United

time, the case is ongoing. Fundamental Data is represented by Roger Hanshaw, who is also speaker of the West Virginia House of Delegates, which passed a bill in 2025 to limit public input on data center development.



Fracking takes over Harrison County, Ohio

Randi Pokladnik and her husband moved to Harrison County, Ohio, in 1998, buying four acres of peaceful, wooded land. A retired research chemist, Pokladnik taught high school for a while, but as fracking operations began moving into the area in the early 2010s, she retired to focus full-time on educating people about the hazards of fracking and other issues.

“We watched the area around our property just become frackland central,” she says. “The only places they haven’t fracked are state parks and [wildlife] areas, but now they’re leasing those off, too.”

Fracking has caused many problems for the area: Increased traffic from trucks carrying wastewater from the wells, air and water pollution and noise.

“There’s a pad above us, less than a mile away,” Pokladnik says. “When they are fracking, it sounds like we’re living at the Cleveland airport. It’s that loud.”

“If people really understood what’s going on, I think they’d be more upset,” Pokladnik says.

Solar Beekeeping Expands Regionally



By Jen Lawhorne

Fields of solar panels are starting to bloom with new life, as energy developers pair solar power with beekeeping in a sweet twist on clean energy.

By planting pollinator-friendly habitats beneath solar arrays, these sites are becoming productive sanctuaries where honeybees thrive, honey flows, and solar energy generation continues to hum along.

Pairing solar energy with agricultural practices is called agrivoltaics, or apivoltaics when specifically referencing beekeeping. These practices help maximize land use by offering a smart, dual solution to two pressing challenges. It addresses the need for clean energy and the rapid loss of pollinator habitat, while boosting economic opportunities for local beekeepers and landowners.

Solar arrays can be designed with enough space and height to accommodate hives, allowing beekeepers to place them under panels. Planting native, non-invasive vegetation like black-eyed Susans, bee balm and clover under panels supports bees, monarch butterflies and other pollinators.

The deep-rooted native plants also prevent soil erosion, reduce the need for constant mowing and improve soil health by boosting soil diversity, increasing organic matter and enriching soil structure. Heavy machinery and site grading during solar farm construction can cause soil compaction, and planting vegetation helps break up and aerate the soil.

Richard Fell, professor emeritus of entomology at Virginia Tech, sees potential with solar beekeeping in maintaining the agricultural use of the land.

“We have a huge problem in the decline of bee and insect populations,” he says. “There’s benefits in increasing the number of plants and creating habitat for insects ... utilizing the land around solar panels with beekeeping is an excellent idea.”

Solar beekeeping can boost rural economies by providing multiple income streams and creating new local opportunities. Landowners hosting solar projects can earn money from solar lease partnerships and generate revenue from honey and beeswax products like candles and salves, all while providing beekeepers with a place to maintain their hives.

Allison Wickham, owner of Siller Pollinator Company based in Charlottesville, Virginia, believes that agrivoltaics is the best way to get rural communities on board with large-scale solar projects.

“When we create economic opportunities for surrounding communities, inject food into local food systems, create agricultural jobs for communities and create clean domestic energy, then it starts to look good,” she says.

Wickham’s company began operating as a hive management operation, working with homeowners and businesses to offer professional beekeeping services like hive installation, maintenance and honey harvesting without requiring clients to handle bees directly. Her work then transitioned to contracting with solar companies after some places started championing the location of pollinator habitats on solar installations.

Virginia’s Smart Pollinator program encourages utilities and land managers to convert single-use land like rights-of-way and solar sites into mixed-use habitats that support bees, butterflies and other pollinators. Albemarle County, which surrounds Charlottesville, requires ground-mounted solar projects over two acres to earn “Gold Certification” through the state’s pollinator program.

Other localities in Virginia have similar programs, and solar



“The case for solar beekeeping is really a case for land stewardship paying multiple dividends at once,” says John Kluge. Photo by Allison Wickham

beekeeping is growing in the state at both small and large scales. Dominion Energy’s 13-acre Black Bear solar farm in Dillwyn, Virginia, houses four honeybee hives — home to roughly 180,000 bees that pollinate wildflowers and crops within a five-mile radius. At Crystal Hill Solar Farm by Urban Grid, 10 hives with about 500,000 bees produce honey and support pollinator health alongside an installation that generates 65 megawatts of solar energy.

Wickham wants solar beekeeping to be more than what she calls “tokenized” agrivoltaics. “Some people think you are going to stick two hives out [in a solar field] and call it farming,” she says, adding that it’s important for solar companies to partner with full-time professional beekeepers to run a true production program on sites.

To promote beekeeping, Siller Pollinator Company hosts “Solar Bee Camp” — a hands-on, two-day agrivoltaics workshop where participants dig into soil health, erosion and native plants, and suit up to work hives. Wickham takes participants to different solar beekeeping operations in the area, one at King Family Vineyard in Crozet and the other at Thistlerock Meadery, where she serves as apiary director.

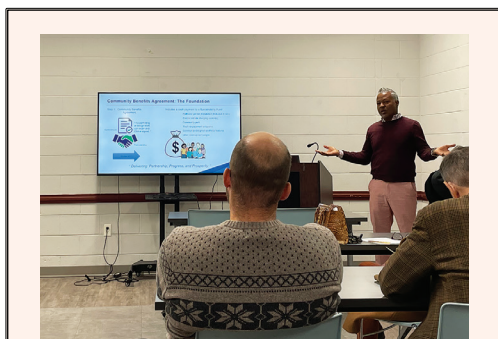
Thistlerock, which started as a regenerative flower farm, touts itself as the first net-zero meadery in the coun-

try, with a 52-kilowatt ground array and a 30-kilowatt rooftop array on its barn to power the meadery’s production and tasting room operations. The meadery, where Wickham manages bee colonies using natural beekeeping practices entirely free of chemical treatments, will have 100 hives under its management this summer.

John Kluge, one of Thistlerock’s owners, shares that the meadery was conceived as an attempt to prove that a business could be built in the right relationship with the land and to provide a model that others can replicate.

“For rural communities in Appalachia and Central Virginia, there’s also a real economic opportunity,” Kluge writes in an email. “Solar beekeeping creates a new revenue stream that doesn’t require displacing agriculture, and it connects energy infrastructure to local food systems in a way that makes both more resilient.”

Kluge explains that the most exciting opportunity with his work lies in combining the energy transition with ecological restoration. Citing Appalachia’s history of shouldering the burden for the country’s energy needs for generations, he explains, “There’s something deeply meaningful about the possibility that the next energy chapter here could also be a chapter of land healing and community renewal.” ♦



The city of Richmond, Virginia, is converting a capped landfill in the city’s East End into a solar meadow with 15 acres of a pollinator garden and 5 megawatts of solar generation. The project is expected to be in operation by the end of 2027.

The Feral Ponies of Grayson Highlands

The herds persevere, despite many challenges in an ever-changing landscape

By Melissa Bahleda

No matter how many times you visit, Grayson Highlands State Park is always enchanting. Famous for its mountain balds — high-elevation, rolling peaks covered in shrubs and grass — the park also offers stunning alpine views, scenic overlooks, historic cabins, dazzling waterfalls and miles of hiking trails from easy to challenging and lesser-traveled to a popular section of the Appalachian Trail.

But for people who visit the park regularly, the truth is no secret: The real magic of the park is the ponies.

Unlike most of the other “wild” horses and ponies across the country, the Grayson Highlands herds have come to be called “feral” ponies as opposed to “wild.” Released initially to keep the grassy balds from becoming overgrown, the original domestically bred and raised ponies quickly adapted to life in the wild, thanks to their hardy Shetland origins. The abundance of grass, lush vegetation and fresh water also makes it ideal pasture land for the ponies.

Wild or feral, there is no question that these ponies and the place they call home are a special combination, especially for those of us who love wildlife and wild places. Having spent countless hours with wild horses all over North America, I understand why so many people enjoy spending time in the presence of these pretty, and sometimes petulant, ponies.

The Wilburn Ridge Pony Association

Shortly after the release of that first herd of ponies in the early 1970s, the Wilburn Ridge Pony Association formed. Since then, the association has worked to protect and

preserve the herds, whose combined population once rose to over 200. Today, that number hovers around 80, with 12 studs leading several different bands of mares and yearlings. The reason for the drop in pony numbers is complicated.

Pony association President Jerry Ward, a self-described “true cowboy,” is a rancher and Highlands native. He took over as head of the pony association in 2022 and serves as the herds’ caregiver and head guardian.

At the time, there were debates over how to best care for the ponies. Some claimed that the ponies should be left to nature and their own devices, while others argued that they should be removed from the landscape altogether, either for the ponies’ safety or in an attempt to restore the natural ecosystems as they existed before the ponies.



Wilburn Ridge Pony Association President Jerry Ward and association members support the herds in many ways, including delivering supplemental hay in winter. Photo by Martin Seelig



The stallion known as Cracker Jack (left) and two of his mares watch over a foal near one of the park’s many rock outcroppings. Photo by Elizabeth Wegmann

Others wanted them routinely fed, vetted and cared for like domestic ponies, either in the park or removed to local farm settings. Now that the population has declined and they are well-cared for, the debates have settled down.

Ward’s job is not easy. The ponies roam an almost 5,000-acre landscape, where the topography often makes it difficult to spot the small equines, especially the newborn spotted foals, whose coloration can become the perfect camouflage, Ward notes.

With stallions competing for territory, pregnant mares surviving harsh winters, new foals arriving in the spring, and other issues, Ward regularly checks on individual ponies and tracks the locations of all the herds. He and the pony association provide

them with supplemental hay in winter, deworming feeds in the spring and medical aid when needed.

Ward lives and raises beef cattle on a nearby farm, relying on his horse and ATV to access the park and bring the ponies what they need — which sometimes includes massive round bales of high-quality hay. The hay has greatly improved the ponies’ overall survival rate during the harsh winter months, as well as their physical condition as they move into spring when mares bring the next generation into the world.

Ward also manages the pony association’s annual September pony auction. Several foals and occasionally a few young stallions or mares are selected and then sold to the highest bidder. The funds raised help support the remaining herd, while the auction serves as a humane way to keep pony numbers at sustainable levels, with many previous buyers returning to add more to their own herd.

Fellow pony association member Elizabeth Wegmann has adopted four Grayson Highlands ponies and knows

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Ponies

Continued from previous page

many other adopters with small herds of these beloved creatures.

Ward takes on most of the care responsibility, but he is not alone. Wegmann and other pony association members, along with volunteers, visit the park often to spend time with the ponies, check on them and let Ward know about any injuries, new foals or signs of illness. They also educate the public about the ponies' needs and history.

Many people first learn about the ponies through stirring photos taken by Wegmann and other association members. These images appear on park materials, social media and websites, shared by pony fans around the world.

Others discover them while visiting the park. "Oh my gosh, there are PONIES up here!" is a sentiment Wegmann and other members hear often. The visitors' delight brightens their faces, too, and the association members have yet another opportunity to educate someone new while they discuss their love and passion for the ponies of the highlands.

Pony prey

Today, the Grayson Highlands ponies still face age-old equine conflict questions over whether "wild" or "feral" horses have a right to the landscape at all. They also deal with new problems, many linked to climate change and the rise in disease and parasites. But Ward is also concerned about another threat to the pony population: Predators.

"Last year we lost over two-thirds of the new foals," Ward says, noting that the loss was higher than usual. "Was all of that due to predators? Probably not. But there are definitely coyotes and bears up here. We have a horse recovering now from a bear attack."

Ward also believes there may be mountain lions in the area. But Assistant Grayson Highlands State Park Manager Andrew Stern isn't convinced of the felines' presence in the park.

"When concerns were first raised in 2023, we consulted with both the Virginia



Above: Watching the ponies break into a run is a rare treat. Photo by Martin Seelig. Right: Storm, one of the herd stallions often viewed by park visitors, is quickly gaining notoriety as one of the "new rock stars" after the well-known pony Fabio was retired from the park. Photo by Elizabeth Wegmann

Department of Wildlife Resources and the U.S. Forest Service biologist assigned to the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area," Stern says. "Based on the available evidence, it was not possible to conclusively determine whether the observed injuries were caused by coyotes, domestic dogs or bears. Additionally, despite conducting intensive searches, we were unable to locate any carcasses."

Mother Nature can seem cruel — the reality is that less than half of the infants born to any species in the wild are likely to survive their first few months, let alone their first year. Yearling ponies

are large, fast and strong enough to escape most predators, and as they mature, the likelihood of their survival also increases.

A people problem

"Those ponies are there for our enjoyment; they're not there for people to feed," Ward tells me.

Stern, too, notes that the biggest issue the ponies face is the behavior of many of the people who come to see them.

"Despite the park's guidelines for people to avoid getting too close or interacting with the ponies, many visitors do touch and feed them," he says. "This has unfortunately resulted in the ponies becoming too accustomed to people and has a negative impact upon their health, as human food can be harmful."

During a recent visit to the park, I noticed that most ponies we encountered were surrounded by people, many of whom were petting and touching them, though not necessarily feeding



them. But, as someone who has spent years of my life seeking out and studying wild horses, it was still somewhat shocking to witness — along with seeing piles of oats and carrots on the ground.

It's still against park guidelines for people to touch or feed the ponies. So what changed?

"People no longer read the signs, and if they do, they feel that the rules are for other people, not for them," Ward says. "We had signs all over the place out there at one time, and people just ignored them. We've talked about doing QR codes, or something like that, because people seem to be willing to read things on their phones; maybe that



A foal looks for trail directions. Photo by Martin Seelig

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On the Front Lines of Appalachia's Surge in Black Lung Disease

By Quenton King

There are over 1,000 federally qualified health centers in the United States, but few can trace their roots directly to coal miners and unions.

The New River Health Association was established in Scarbro, West Virginia, in the 1970s with funds from the United Mine Workers Association. At the time, the UMWA was pushing for more rural health care for mining communities who often had to rely on coal company doctors — if they had any doctors at all.

“[New River Health Association] was started by a bunch of coal miners saying, ‘We need this in our area. We have no access to health care,’” says Lisa Emery, the director of New River Health’s Black Lung Clinic in Oak Hill, one of the clinics that the UMWA helped start.

That mining history is strongly reflected in the work New River does today.

“We always have a certain [number] of coal miners on our board, and I think that that’s really important to stay with our roots,” Emery says.

Health care for coal miners remains as important now as it was back then, given the crisis unfolding in coalfields across the country, particularly in Central Appalachia.

Black lung disease, or coal workers’ pneumoconiosis, is a severely debilitating lung disease that was in decline but is now on the rise again. The condition has no cure. And today, what used to be a disease among older miners with decades of work under their belts is affecting miners as young as their 30s, with decades to go until retirement.

Black lung clinics have been working together to compile and analyze data. Between 2019 to 2024, about 52% of miners who received chest X-rays — more than 7,000 — tested positive for black lung.

More than 20 years ago, Anita Wolfe, former director of the Coal Workers’ Health Surveillance Program in Morgantown, West Virginia, started seeing high rates of black lung reemerging. The federal program is part of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

She shared that a government doc-

tor came to talk to her one day.

“He said, ‘I think there’s something wrong with your data.’ I said, ‘There’s nothing wrong with my data.’”

The doctor responded, “Well then, we have a really big problem.”

Black lung clinics

New River has been providing specialized black lung care to coal miners in Southern West Virginia for over 40 years. The clinic is one of about two dozen federally supported black lung clinics. Half are located in Kentucky, Virginia and West Virginia.

At black lung clinics, miners can get chest X-rays and lung exams to determine whether they may have the disease.

Benefits counselors are also on hand to guide miners through the process of applying for state and federal black lung claims. Clinic staff provide rehabilitation services, including helping miners try to regain lung function. Some of New River’s locations have extended hours to ensure miners can get care before or after late-night and early-morning shifts.

Emery explains that having specialized care and staff familiar with mining culture helps build trust and improve patient health.

“One thing that’s really important about the black lung clinics is that these men have really grueling schedules, and they don’t see primary care providers if they are super sick,” Emery says. “They end up going to urgent care, and then that’s a frustrating cycle for them because they don’t get established with someone.”

The extra care that black lung clinics provide helps get miners through the door.

“It’s a really distrusting population, first and foremost,” Emery says. “The black lung clinics can be their first connection with someone they trust. My main goal is education, education, education, and getting them to trust me.”

Emery estimates she’s on track to see 400 coal miners this year.

The federal program

Black lung disease is progressive, meaning it worsens over time, even



Anita Wolfe helping Alabama miners with paperwork. Photo courtesy of Anita Wolfe

after a miner is no longer exposed to high-dust environments. Since there is no cure, the best course of action is to avoid exposure at all costs.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Congress took action on mine safety after years of advocacy and attention on mining illnesses and disasters that were becoming more common. Congress recognized that workers’ compensation programs were frequently inadequate to support miners who fell ill with this preventable disease and created the federal black lung program in 1969.

A miner approved for the program receives a monthly disability benefit, which increases modestly if they have dependents. They also receive a lifetime medical benefit that covers doctors’ visits, procedures and medications related to the disease.

Although the initial application can be done in a few hours, according to some benefits counselors, what comes after is often a daunting process full of medical exams, court appearances and more paperwork.

The process is difficult in no small part because coal companies and their insurers don’t want to be on the hook for paying lifetime medical and disability benefits. Typically, coal companies must carry insurance that covers black lung liabilities. More successful federal black lung claims by miners against companies mean higher costs. If coal companies had followed proper venti-

lation and other engineering controls, there would have been less black lung in the first place.

New River has long provided tests and support for miners applying for state black lung disability, which has benefits that are not as impactful as federal benefits. The U.S. Department of Labor sets requirements for physicians certified to perform federal testing. Until recently, New River would refer coal miners to other clinics for those exams.

But in March 2026, New River began offering monthly federal exams through Drew Harris, a doctor from the University of Virginia. Eventually, Emery hopes to get other well-respected pulmonologists from other states to help at New River.

Emery explains it’s critical that trusted, experienced doctors perform the tests to give miners the best possible chance of succeeding in complicated black lung claim applications.

Knowing what to look for

On a Wednesday afternoon at New River’s Oak Hill Black Lung Clinic, Emery places two folders on a conference table. Inside are redacted X-ray and CT readings of coal miners’ lungs.

First, she shows a miner’s X-ray reading from a doctor less experienced in identifying signs of black lung. Next, she shows a reading of the same miner, but interpreted by a doctor who is federally

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Black Lung

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approved to “classify chest radiographic images of workers participating in health surveillance programs.”

Page after page, Emery repeats this pattern for many anonymous miners.

Each time the result is the same. The first reading might suggest things other than black lung, or that the disease is in the earliest stages. Then, always, the certified doctor suspects black lung is present or worse than the original interpreter suggested. Sometimes it’s the most severe form — progressive massive fibrosis.

Emery knows the history of each person detailed on each page — she’s often met their families, heard their anxieties and tried her best to assure them while remaining honest. But she knows that, statistically, at least half of the patients who come in for a scan will suffer from black lung for years.

“Every single person is one page, and this is just two years,” Emery says, holding up a stack of papers. “I’ve weighed this. It’s over a pound, but a pound of paper is a lot of paper.”

Challenges from the top down

Experts agree that silica dust is a leading contributor to the rise in black lung diagnoses. Silica dust is kicked up when mining operations cut through rocks. Much of the easily accessible coal has already been extracted in Central Appalachia, forcing coal operations to dig deeper through layers of silica-rich rock to reach thinner coal seams.

Medical experts have long known that silica dust is toxic. The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration implemented protections for many workers against silica dust during the Obama administration.

Safety in coal mines, however, is regulated by the Mine Safety and Health Administration, which has dragged its feet on enacting a similar rule.

After years of calls to action from miners and mine safety advocates, in 2024, the Biden administration finalized a rule to limit miners’ exposure to silica dust. That rule was set to take effect in April 2025, but the Trump administration refused to defend it in federal court against a lawsuit filed by mining industry associations to challenge the rule.

In November 2025, the Department of Labor outlined in a legal filing that it would redo parts of the rule to satisfy the industry’s objections. At press time, the DOL has not elaborated on its intent for the rule.

At the same time, the Trump administration was trying to gut the only agency that federally certifies doctors who can help coal miners get the true diagnosis — and benefits — owed to them.

Coal Workers’ Health Surveillance Program

Although she had already been an employee at NIOSH and was the daughter of a coal miner who died with black lung, Anita Wolfe was surprised when she started working at the agency’s Coal Workers’ Health Surveillance Program by the number of miners getting sick



Anita Wolfe speaks with miners about the NIOSH Coal Workers’ Health Surveillance Program. Photo courtesy of Anita Wolfe

with black lung.

In her two decades at the CWHSP, Wolfe and her team’s work revealed that one in five long-tenured miners had some form of black lung disease. And in recent years it was showing up in young miners as well.

“Like everyone else in the world, we were told black lung was an old man’s disease,” Wolfe says. “You never heard about the young people getting sick. You just assumed it wasn’t happening.”

But it is.

Wolfe helped start NIOSH’s mobile black lung van in the early 2000s, which drives to coal communities around the country and provides free, confidential X-rays and lung function tests.

The program also provides a unique, federally required duty.

Any coal miner who learns they have black lung can request to transfer to a less dusty and toxic part of a coal mine and continue working. The health surveillance program is the only entity that can certify a coal miner for this right.

More than 20 years after she started working with miners, Wolfe, now retired, was shocked when Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. announced in 2025 that the agency was firing nearly all of NIOSH’s staff, including those in the coal program.

Lisa Emery, director of New River Health’s Black Lung Clinic. Photo by Quenton King

“I literally sat and cried when I heard it was being done away with,” Wolfe says. “I said, ‘This can’t happen.’”

Cutting the coal program would mean that miners wouldn’t be able to exercise their right to request transfers if they have early signs of black lung but want to keep working. Firing all of NIOSH would mean that no one could certify doctors or perform mine safety research at the NIOSH offices in Spokane, Washington, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Wolfe started making calls to West Virginia lawmakers. She testified in a federal court hearing on behalf of a miner who sued Health and Human Services to reinstate the surveillance program.

The judge ordered HHS to reinstate workers at NIOSH’s coal program. Wolfe continued to advocate for its importance. Finally, in January 2026, the agency ended its plans to cut NIOSH workers, nearly a year after announcing the layoffs.

Back in Oak Hill, Lisa Emery had expected the NIOSH black lung van to come for a two-day stint, providing free X-rays to miners. The night before, she learned that a technical issue had prevented the van from coming, but they have plans to get back on the road soon.

Emery went ahead and offered all-day, walk-in federal black lung claim assistance with counselors from New River and other clinics.

“At least I can say when I leave this Earth that I love my job, and I changed lives,” Emery says. ♦



Coalition Stopped Mining on the Edge of the Monongahela National Forest — for Now

By Dan Radmacher

Jeff Eisenbeiss has lived on a 168-acre farm in northern Greenbrier County, West Virginia, since 1996. He bought it from the third-generation owner whose grandfather had purchased the property in 1872. The property, which borders the Monongahela National Forest, features several native trout streams, and Eisenbeiss is very attentive to water quality issues on his farm.

Biologists assessed one of the streams in October 2021. The biologists measured the acidity and conductivity of the stream, and took DNA samples from the native trout.

“It was a model trout stream; the pH was perfect,” Eisenbeiss says. But that changed later that year. “I came back from volunteering at Snowshoe [Resort] one day, and the trout stream was so muddy. I’d never seen it look so bad.”

The next day, the explosions started.

That’s how Eisenbeiss learned a new coal mine was operating above his property. He also discovered that South Fork Coal Company, which operated the Rocky Run Surface Mine and several others next to the Monongahela National Forest, was using a haul road through the national forest to transport coal to a railroad facility about 20 miles away in Rupert, West Virginia.

“The haul road is literally on the saddle of two different watersheds,” Eisenbeiss says. “It’s either draining into the South Fork of the Cherry or into the Greenbrier.”

The huge coal-hauling trucks that ran daily along this road dislodged dirt and rocks that end up in nearby streams, causing sedimentation and harming habitat for endangered species like the candy darter and freshwater mussels. They also leaked oil and other pollutants, and coal dust blown from the trucks adds to the pollution.

The candy darter was declared endangered in 2018, and the South Fork of Cherry River is among the remaining critical habitat that federal agencies have designated to protect the colorful fish.

A coalition is born

As Eisenbeiss witnessed how the mining activity was impacting his

streams and nearby rivers, he looped in Rick Webb from the Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance, an environmental group initially established to fight the Atlantic Coast Pipeline. Webb brought in Andrew Young, a law student who later joined ABRA after completing his degree.

Young and Webb researched the issue, sending Freedom of Information Act requests to federal and state agencies and digging into the 1977 Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act, or SMCRA, which sets strict limits on mining activity, including hauling coal, in Eastern national forests.

“We figured out that what they were doing wasn’t legal,” Young says. “We realized that we couldn’t do this ourselves. Once we realized we had something, it became about getting the right crew together.”

They reached out to Willie Dodson, coal impacts program manager at Appalachian Voices, the nonprofit that produces this publication. Eisenbeiss is a member of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, which also got involved. Other organizations soon got on board, including the Center for Biological Diversity, Appalachian Mountain Advocates, the Greenbrier River Watershed Association and others.

The Don’t Mine the Mon coalition was born.

“It wasn’t hard to get a coalition together,” Dodson says. “This was happening in the middle of an exceptional area of West Virginia along the edge of the Monongahela, with highland ridges and swift mountain streams. The peaks top out above 4,000 feet, hosting some of the southernmost

stands of red spruce forest. Cranberry Wilderness is nearby.

“The people of Richwood, West Virginia, just downstream, get their drinking water from the North Fork of the Cherry River. The town is actively working to develop its tourism economy, taking advantage of what this tremendous area has to offer. It is a destination for anglers, boaters, birders and hikers. Protecting this place from mining — especially illegal incursions into the Mon — was a no-brainer.”



Top: West Virginia Division of Natural Resources biologists take samples from one of Jeff Eisenbeiss’s native trout streams in October 2021. Bottom: A clear-running stream on Eisenbeiss’s property runs into Panther Creek, which is filled with sedimentation from haul-road runoff in 2022. Photos by Jeff Eisenbeiss

The coalition’s goal was to shut down the haul road, known as Haulroad #2, and to stop the mines from polluting the Laurel Creek and South Fork of the Cherry River watersheds. The conservation groups filed lawsuits against the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and South Fork Coal Company, and intervened in administrative proceedings where possible. The campaign got a national boost in April 2025, when American Rivers included the Cherry/Gauley river watershed on its annual list of Most Endangered Rivers due to the impacts of South Fork’s mining.

“We put together a comprehensive list of South Fork’s violations and made sure that made it into the record,” Young says. “All of us were trying to submit evidence of how egregious everything was to the court. We wanted the court to see that they were wildly out of compliance. It was an outlaw operation.”

A beneficial mistake

When South Fork initially applied to the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection for a permit for the haul road in 2013, the application materials included a notarized map of the road that specifically stated no part of the haul road would cross national forest land.

“We can’t say whether this was a lie or a mistake, but if it was a mistake, it was a very beneficial one for the company,” Dodson says.

In Young’s study of the surface mining law, he found that it limited coal mining activity within national forests like the Monongahela unless a company had “valid existing rights” — a legal term indicating that a mining operation predated the national forest designation of the affected land.

“The way they went about it, they got to mine for five years they otherwise wouldn’t have been able to,” Young says, referring to the company’s sworn statement that they would not cross the national forest.

South Fork applied to the Forest Service for a special road-use authorization for the haul road in 2020.

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Mining Near the Mon

Continued from previous page

Despite the company's lack of valid existing rights and ongoing damage to the forest caused by heavy equipment, the Forest Service approved the permit.

While continuing to pursue lawsuits and administrative actions, the coalition also sent a letter to Sharon Buccino, the head of the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement at the time, asking her to shut down the haul road. In the waning days of the Biden administration, Buccino did just that, issuing a cessation order barring South Fork from using the road unless it could prove it had valid existing rights.

But that decision was reversed under the new administration after South Fork Coal appealed. The Department of the Interior's Office of Hearings and Appeals granted the company's request without notifying the public or interested parties like the coalition members.

Months later, OSMRE issued a determination that South Fork Coal did have "valid existing rights" that predated the passage of SMCRA to operate a coal haul road within the national forest — even though the company was founded in 2011, 34 years after that law passed.

'Obviously, South Fork was done'

It turned out, however, that South Fork was in dire financial trouble. The company declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy in February 2025. Chapter 11 bankruptcies allow companies to restructure and eliminate some debt in hopes of continuing to operate.

But in August, a month after OSMRE made its valid existing rights determination, the company said it would liquidate rather than restructure.

According to Young, the decision to liquidate was made when South Fork's sale to another company fell through after the bankruptcy court found that neither the "valid existing rights" determination nor the authorization to use the Forest Service road was transferable.

In August and September 2025, the defunct company, which had laid off all its workers, was hit with multiple citations and cessation orders from the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection for mine cleanup and pollution violations.

South Fork Coal's Rocky Run Surface Mine lies within the Monongahela National Forest's proclamation boundaries, the area Congress originally established as potential national forest when the Mon was created. The mine is approximately 6 miles from Cranberry Wilderness, 2 miles from Falls of Hills Creek and within view of the Fork Mountain Trail. Photo by Andrew Young, ABRA

Around the same time, South Fork lost the Forest Service authorization to use Haulroad #2 after missing an annual permit filing deadline.

The coalition celebrated and asked to dismiss their remaining legal cases.

"Obviously, South Fork was done," Young says.

Mining had stopped. Huge trucks were no longer rumbling through the national forest, wrecking the road and dropping sediment into the area's pristine trout streams. Eisenbeiss started to see his land recover.

"Since the haul road has shut down, the creek is starting to heal," he says. "We're keeping our fingers crossed that they can't open this thing back up. We'll see what happens."

Ongoing threats

Even though South Fork Coal is functionally shut down, the threat to nearby watersheds and the Monongahela National Forest remains, and the fate of the land torn apart by the mining is uncertain. Enforcement orders issued by DEP have continued to mount in 2026.

West Virginia Highlands Conservancy Director Olivia Miller has been seeking to meet with DEP to discuss the agency's expectations and plans for South Fork Coal Company's now-abandoned mines. After no response for months, a DEP representative notified Miller in April that a new company had submitted applications for the transfer of South Fork's permits.

DEP did not respond to multiple requests for comment from The Appalachian Voice for this article. Neither did the Forest Service or the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement.

Young worries that this new company could try to steamroll through the mining process on the Rocky Run permit before the coalition could stop it with court challenges.

But even if no new mining takes place, other concerns remain. Idled mines that haven't been properly restored can cause many problems — sedimentation from run-off, rock slides, increased acid mine drainage if treat-

ment systems aren't maintained, and more.

"The other fear is that it's just going to sit up there for 30 years before anything happens," Young says. "Things will get exponentially worse."

"Long-term, we'd love to see that land restored in some way and maybe acquired by the national forest," says Miller. "This is some of the highest-elevation spruce forest left in the state. The Rocky Run Surface Mine just goes round and round it, leaving a little stand of red spruce up there just trying to hold on."

Ideally, restoration wouldn't just be good for the land, the watershed and the nearby communities.

"When a coal company gets a mining permit, they are agreeing to restore the land afterwards," says Appalachian Voices' Dodson. "But when an operator like South Fork runs roughshod to get the coal out, then lays off their workers before reclamation is done, they are not only hurting the environment, but they are betraying a commitment they made to their employees. The ideal outcome here would be for those laid-off workers to be re-employed reclaiming this land to the highest possible standards."

There are other threats to the Monongahela and other national forests. During a recent presentation,



Dodson discussed three executive orders signed by President Donald Trump during his first few months in office that encourage coal mining and other energy production on public lands.

This year, Trump signed more orders to keep coal plants operating, even when the energy they produce is more expensive than other options, and to encourage the Department of Defense to sign contracts to get power from coal-fired plants. Federal law still greatly restricts mining operations within the boundaries of a national forest, but the South Fork Coal case shows the loopholes the coal industry could exploit to avoid some of these restrictions.

"It's alarming that this is the direction we're going," Dodson says. "But any attempts to mine or haul coal in the Monongahela National Forest are going to get a whole lot of fight out of us." ♦

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English Language Learning in Appalachia

New and persistent challenges for students and programs

By Abby Hassler

For over a year, Nestor Pineda, a 35-year-old man from Honduras, has been taking English-language classes at Centro Hispano de East TN, a nonprofit organization serving the Latino community in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Speaking English fluently could open up more economic and social opportunities for him, and he views his time in the country as his chance to learn as much as possible, work hard and eventually return home.

And Pineda's time is precious. Each minute he spends here is another one away from his 5-year-old son in Honduras. He believes he has to make sacrifices now to "build a better future" for his family.

"I'm a person that is simply here to just work, and I'm not dangerous," Pineda says in Spanish through a translator. "I'm simply here to take advantage of the opportunities in this country and be able to safely return back home."

Pineda is one of millions of English language learners across the United States. Learning a language is always difficult. But current aggressive approaches to immigration policy are creating more barriers for learners and the programs that serve them than ever before.

English language learning in Appalachia

There is little doubt that English is the de facto language of the U.S. Its usage generally permeates most of everyday life — from public schools to television shows to trips to the grocery store. Yet, until the president's March 2025 executive order, it was never designated the country's official language.

For those who wish to learn or improve English proficiency, learning avenues vary greatly depending on age, immigration status and other factors.

Public schools are federally mandated to provide translation services and language-learning support to K-12 students, including English as a second language programs, where progress is measured by standardized tests or assessments.

Learning or improving English proficiency as an adult isn't as straightforward. Adults may enroll in programs at community colleges or universities, take classes at community-based organizations or faith institutions, participate in workplace or vocational English programs, or self-study with online resources or services.

'You should already know it'

Numerous misconceptions about adult learners of English persist, including the belief that they don't want



"When [students] stop coming to classes, it's not because they don't want to come, it's because they have some struggle in their personal lives or professional lives," says Erika Rohan, ELA program coordinator. Photo courtesy of Blue Ridge Community College

to learn or that they don't need classes in the first place.

"It's just like, 'Oh, you moved here. You should already know it,'" says Lauren Fidler, college and career readiness coordinator at Southwestern Community College in Sylva, North Carolina.

For adults in the U.S., learning English becomes more difficult when navigating a complex immigration system, working full-time, juggling family responsibilities, accessing reliable transportation, struggling economically and simply lacking awareness of available services or programs.

"Learning English as an adult takes courage and persistence, and even small progress is something to be proud of," says Ana Paola, a 28-year-old learner from Mexico who takes classes at Blue

counting in the U.S., but she says, "the fast-paced nature of my life prevented me from truly mastering the language."

Kozera also takes English classes at Blue Ridge Community College, calling this the best decision she could have made.

"It is a wonderful opportunity to interact with others who face similar challenges," Kozera says. "Through constant practice and learning, I am realizing that communication is an essential tool for improving not only my own life but the lives of my loved ones as well."

Similarly, Diana Medina, a 38-year-old woman from Honduras living in Roanoke, Virginia, used to rely on her husband for translation help. Now, she takes English classes at Blue Ridge Literacy, a community-based literacy organization, and spends about two hours each day studying. Her ultimate goal is to learn enough to retrain as a nurse, a role she held in her home country.

"Our learners are part of the fabric of the community and should be understood and included as such," says Aho Salem, executive director of Blue Ridge Literacy in Roanoke, Virginia.

Tearful classrooms

"There was a lot of fear throughout this year," says Fidler about the impact of immigration policy on the classroom.

During fall 2025, three of Fatima Gindeel's students began skipping classes and eventually told her they



"At Blue Ridge Literacy, our adult learners are often simultaneously navigating new systems, responsibilities and expectations while working and supporting their families," says Aho Salem. "This makes English learning closely tied to immediate, real-life needs." Photo courtesy of Blue Ridge Literacy

Ridge Community College in Western North Carolina. "It takes time, patience and effort. There are moments of frustration, especially when you don't understand everything or can't express yourself the way you want. However, with discipline and consistency, it is possible to achieve your goals."

Patricia Kozera, who is from Peru, studied English in school and earned an associate's degree in ac-

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Home on the Range ... in Appalachia?

By Abby Hassler

Many people believe wild bison have only ever lived and roamed in Yellowstone National Park or the vast open spaces depicted in Western films. Yet, Indigenous and archaeological records indicate that bison were found across what is now the continental United States.

In Letcher County, Kentucky, the Appalachian Rekindling Project, an Indigenous, women-led organization, is seeking to reintroduce bison to the region on 63 acres of a reclaimed mountaintop removal coal mine. The group's goal is to bring four bison to the property this summer, along with restoring native grasses, such as big bluestem, for them to eat.

"Their survival here creates survival for so many other species, including us," says Tiffany Pyette, a Cherokee descendant and founder and co-executive director of the Appalachian Rekindling Project. "And so it's really, really important that we bring them back. We're bringing them back for a lot of reasons, but mostly because the land needs them."

Did bison live in Appalachia?

In short, yes. Bison did once inhabit parts of Appalachia.

"Bison are an animal that can adapt to both living on the prairies and grasslands, but they also live in other ecosystems as well," says Rosalyn LaPier, an award-winning Indigenous writer, environmental historian, ethnobotanist and professor. "But they eat grass, so they primarily have to live in places where there's grass that they can eat."

LaPier shares that when people talk about bison, they usually are referring to the Plains bison, known by its repetitive scientific name *Bison bison bison*. Overharvesting, territory loss and habitat changes from increased farming — all attributed to European settlers — led to the overall species' decline and eradication from the wild in the Eastern U.S.

The disappearance of bison from Appalachia over the centuries is inextricably tied to the forced removal and cultural and physical genocide of Indigenous people in the U.S.

"Indigenous communities today are working to rebuild and working to revitalize some of their cultural practices from the past and religious practices," LaPier says, adding that this involves their relationship to the natural world, including bison.

Bison as ecosystem engineers

Pyette refers to bison as "ecosystem engineers" that offer numerous benefits to the land, from their hooves that help till the soil to their fur that stores seeds, which are dispersed to the land.

The project's herd will rotationally graze, and the organization will plant native grasses and plants for both the animals and ecological improvements to the land. Some include aronia, persimmon, plum, Kentucky coffee tree, spicebush, bundleflower, false indigo, hazel and senna. Their diet will be supplemented with hay, which will be grown on another property the organization owns in Virginia.

After testing the property's water and plants, the group determined that while the plants are safe for consumption, the water is not — it contains high levels of aluminum. For the first three years, the Appalachian Rekindling Project will truck in clean water for the bison, while the team works to create healthier



"Bison are wild animals: They're not big fluffy pets," Rosalyn LaPier says. "They just look big and slow. They are incredibly fast and agile creatures. They run really fast." Bison can run 35 miles per hour and jump 6 feet into the air. Photo by Klaus Stebani via Pixabay

water conditions on the property.

"We want them to be as wild as possible," Pyette says.

In early 2026, the organization met its \$60,000 fundraising goal to build a fence around its property. The fence is less about keeping the bison in and more about keeping people off the property to protect the animals.

"They're not that interested in leaving if they have everything they need," Pyette says. "Now, if they don't have what they need, they will leave to go find it."

They are starting with only four bison because of the site's small size compared to the wide-open spaces out west.

"Ideally, for one bison, you should have about 20 acres," Pyette says. "So, with our 63 [acres], we're pushing it."

As the bison breed and the herd grows naturally, Pyette hopes to share bison with other Indigenous-led organizations looking to reintroduce bison.

'Incredibly healing'

It's no coincidence that the property falls within the designated boundaries of the proposed construction site for

a 1,408-bed federal prison. The organization acquired the land with support from the grassroots coalition Building Community Not Prisons.

"We have other plans for this land, because our community deserves better, the land deserves better, and we have Indigenous knowledge on how to fix what was wrong," Pyette shared on a January 2026 webinar.

The Federal Bureau of Prisons still intends to move forward with the proposed prison, and U.S. Rep. Harold "Hal" Rogers of Kentucky applauded the inclusion of \$610 million for construction funding in the 2026 federal funding package. But, Pyette points out, the agency won't be able to build using its original blueprint because of the organization's property — and she won't sell. To date, the group hasn't been approached about selling the land.

Ultimately, Pyette says, "bison are everything" for Indigenous populations and "truly a sacred animal." Reintroducing bison to their homelands and being around them once again feels powerful.

"It's deeply healing not to imagine what times were like — our ancestors' relationship with them — but to see it," Pyette says. "That's incredibly healing." ♦

Bison or buffalo?

"Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam," goes the first line of the Western folk anthem, "Home on the Range." Scientifically, there are no buffalo in North America, only bison. Both bison and buffalo are animals in the Bovidae family. However, buffalo are indigenous to South Asia and Africa — the water buffalo and Cape buffalo, respectively.

Many 'Permitting Reform' Proposals Would Further Strip Environmental Protections, Weaken Public Input

By Appalachian Voices staff

Legislators and the Trump administration are pushing changes to environmental laws under the banner of "permitting reform." Supporters say these changes will help build infrastructure faster. While changes are needed to federal processes to allow construction of critical infrastructure, critics warn that many proposed changes will weaken protections for air and water, and limit the public's ability to have a say in decisions affecting their communities.

At the center of the debate is the National Environmental Policy Act, known as NEPA, a bedrock, bipartisan environmental law. It requires federal agencies to consider the environmental and socioeconomic impacts of major proposed federal projects or projects that require federal approval — such as effects to water quality, species habitats, traffic patterns or local businesses.

NEPA has also been an important tool for residents to have a say in projects that impact their health and safety, hold the government accountable to the law and reduce the negative impacts of major infrastructure projects.

Recent rollbacks

The law has already been significantly weakened. A day-one executive order from President Donald Trump directed the White House Council on Environmental Quality to eliminate its longstanding NEPA regulations. A D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals ruling in late 2024 found the council lacked the authority to issue the regulations. The regulations have been

replaced with non-binding guidance.

In response, federal agencies have changed how they handle environmental reviews. Some have shortened or eliminated public comment periods for certain projects. Others now require consideration of only the most direct and immediate environmental impacts — not long-term impacts or downstream damage. Some also allow project applicants to draft their own environmental review documents instead of the agency drafting them, the creating a serious conflict of interest.

More threats

Congress is considering additional rollbacks, such as the SPEED Act, which passed the House and could be considered by the Senate. Among other changes, the SPEED Act would limit agencies' responsibility to consider new scientific information, even research submitted during the comment period and conducted after a project is proposed.

The SPEED Act would also make it harder for people impacted by a project to sue a federal agency for failing to comply with NEPA. It would shorten the window to bring a lawsuit from six years to 150 days and would require litigants to have previously submitted a unique comment specifically related to their legal challenge.

It often takes longer than 150 days to understand a project's potential impacts and to obtain legal representation. Critics say this would be especially hard on rural or disadvantaged communities that may not learn about a nearby project

until after the public comment window has closed.

Less than one-quarter of 1% of NEPA projects are litigated, so restricting lawsuits doesn't "speed up" the vast majority of projects — it just makes it harder for the public to hold agencies and industry accountable.

What actually speeds up projects

One key barrier to faster project permitting is limited staff and funding at agencies handling NEPA permitting, such as the U.S. Environmental Protec-

tion Agency, a problem worsened by recent staffing and budget cuts. Research shows that early, meaningful engagement with communities and local governments leads to better decisions, fewer conflicts and, ultimately, quicker projects.

Other proposed solutions include ensuring agencies have access to better technology and updating antiquated federal websites. This would help agencies provide clearer information to the public and to project developers, and make the permitting process more transparent and easier to navigate. ♦

More cuts to environmental protections

Under EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin, the agency is slashing many environmental and health protections. Here are a few:

- **Devaluing human health:** The EPA will no longer assign a monetary value to the number of lives saved and healthcare costs avoided as a result of air pollution regulations, while still assigning a monetary value to the costs for polluters to comply with the regulations.
- **Denying climate science:** The EPA rescinded the endangerment finding, which is a scientific report and a rule that found greenhouse gas emissions pose a threat to human health and therefore could be regulated under the Clean Air Act. This move will make it harder for the federal government to regulate industries that contribute to climate change.

- **Taking protections away from wetlands and streams:** The EPA and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' proposed new definition of "waters of the United States" would eliminate protections for a significant portion of America's wetlands and streams, including headwater streams that don't flow year-round. Without strong state or local protections, anyone could dump pollutants into these waterways or bury streams and wetlands.
- **Limiting states' authority to protect their waters:** The EPA has proposed a rule to limit the input of states in federal projects that could impact state waters. This change would allow the federal government to attempt to force through projects that could make waters unsuitable for drinking, swimming or fishing.

Less Support for Communities with Mine Problems

In February, the Trump administration issued a regulation to weaken the Ten Day Notice process that helps community members call in federal enforcement when state regulators don't do a good job policing environmental problems at coal mines

Created by the 1977 surface mining law, the Ten Day Notice process gives state regulators 10 days to explain their plans to correct a problem citizens have reported at a mine before federal agencies get involved.

Community members have repeatedly used the process to force action when state agencies have ignored problems at mines

— erosion, landslide risks, drinking water contamination and more. The new regulation would take power away from coal mining communities by establishing an opaque process that allows federal regulators to indefinitely delay issuing a Ten Day Notice. It would subject some complaints to a different, less-urgent bureaucratic review that can postpone action and allow ongoing harms to go unchecked.

In April, Citizens Coal Council, Sierra Club and Appalachian Voices sued to stop this attempt to weaken the process. — Dan Radmacher

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See current action alerts and get involved!

[APPVOICES.ORG/ACTIONS](https://appvoices.org/actions)

FEMA

Continued from page 10

Yosefa raised the money through an online fundraiser set up by a friend. But due to the holiday break and difficulty reaching the Renew NC staff, her payment was a day late. Her case was closed.

“I didn’t know what was going on,” Yosefa says. “I kept trying to get a hold of people.”

After months of uncertainty and a lack of communication, she was finally able to appeal the process. In March, she was finally approved.

“I’m still a little paranoid and not fully at ease yet, but this is as far as we’ve gotten in this process so far — so I’m optimistic,” Yosefa says.

FEMA Act of 2025

“In a big disaster, 90% of the money that gets spent is coming from our tax dollars, through the federal government

or state governments, and then back to us,” says Andrew Rumbach of the Urban Institute. “And so these programs and how they operate matter a lot.”

Rumbach shares that there are plenty of ideas on “how to make some of these processes less painful, while also not opening them up to massive, potential issues with waste and abuse that are broadly supported across both sides of the aisle.”

One recent piece of bipartisan legislation introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives is the Fixing Emergency Management for Americans Act of 2025, or FEMA Act. Some commonsense changes outlined in the act include using a single application for all federal disaster aid programs, increasing flexibility in how funds can be spent, and ensuring that rural and economically distressed areas get the help they need. The bill has not yet been called for a vote. ♦

Read about Appalachian Voices’ support of the FEMA Act at appvoices.org/fema

Language Learning

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wouldn’t be able to attend anymore due to fears of deportation.

“I told them that their safety was more important to me than anything else, even though, at the end of the day, I really wanted them to be in classes and provide them with the support they needed,” says Gindeel, who teaches at the Adult Learning Center at Monongalia County Technical Education Center in Morgantown, West Virginia.

Similarly, Rubí Flores Reyes, adult education coordinator at Centro Hispano, says, “It makes it hard for me to push for everyone to come to class when there’s a risk — there’s a big risk coming here.”

For Reyes, it’s hard not to worry about her students when they miss a class or she doesn’t see them for a while.

“I’ve had my clients disappear — people that I used to see all the time,”

she says.

Melanie, an elementary school ESL teacher, works in East Tennessee, where many students’ families are being impacted by mass deportations. She requested anonymity to protect her students’ identities.

“I can’t think of a time I’ve ever had to leave a classroom crying, and that’s happened to me four times this school year,” she says.

Moments stick with her: During a lesson, a kindergartener clutched a photo of her dad, who was recently deported, and cried silently. A former student told her, “I love this song. My dad played it a lot for me until, you know, I don’t really understand what happened, but he’s gone.”

She explains that while kids are resilient, it’s hard to predict long-term learning impacts, but overall, she’s had far more kids crying in her classroom than usual.

“And crying kids usually don’t result in good language learning,” she adds.

Right now, she’s weaving in little moments of joy into the classroom: One-minute dance parties. Outdoor classroom time. Spanish lunch on Fridays.

Precarious future ahead

“All of these [immigration and refugee policy] shifts happening are making short- and long-term planning nearly impossible for many of our learners,” says Ahoo Salem of Blue Ridge Literacy.

In recent years, refugees from Afghanistan have made up the largest population of the over 500 learners each year at the nonprofit. This population, among other refugees, has faced significant challenges and uncertainty after the Trump administration halted the U.S. refugee resettlement program in early 2025 and later set a historically low cap on admissions, in addition to other obstacles for people seeking lawful permanent residence.

Students from Haiti, primarily on Temporary Protected Status, were the nonprofit’s second-largest population, which is no longer the case due to ongoing attempts to eliminate TPS for Haitian immigrants.

Recalling a recent conversation with a TPS student, Salem says, “I was speaking with her, checking in on how she was doing, and she said, ‘Well, today, I am documented. Yesterday, it seemed maybe I wasn’t. Tomorrow, we’ll see how it’s going to work.’” ♦

Ponies

Continued from page 21

would work, or maybe it wouldn’t.”

But why would feeding carrots or apples or anything else to a pony be a problem? It’s because the results can be deadly.

For much of the year, the ponies, although technically “feral,” live like wild horses, eating dried grass and hay and edible native plants. When tourist season arrives and carrots, apples, crackers and other snacks appear, the ponies, who are not used to these types of food, gladly snatch them up. But unfamiliar snacks can cause colic, a severe and painful condition that can result in death if not detected early.

From Wegmann and the other pony association members to Grayson Highlands State Park staff, everyone agrees that the biggest threat to the ponies stems from contact with people — especially from people feeding them. If Ward had a dollar for every carrot he’s picked up off the ground over the years, he says, “I’d be a wealthy guy.”

“Probably for that reason, I hate carrots,” he says.

Pony perseverance

All these threats to the ponies begs



Elizabeth Wegmann’s years-long relationship and love for the famous stallion Fabio — in retirement at Rugby Creek Farm since 2021 — are reflected in her many photos of the pony, which have helped raise awareness for the highlands herds. Photo by Elizabeth Wegmann

the question: If they’re not native and don’t need to be out there, why keep them out there at all?

Everyone has a different answer, but for me, it’s the magical feeling that many people, myself included, feel when they pull into Grayson Highlands State Park. No matter the weather or the season, the highlands of Virginia, like highlands everywhere, are a special and unique place. Here, vistas disappear and reappear in the mist. Sometimes you can see for miles, and yet not know

what might lie around the next bend in the trail. It’s a place where elves and sprites and unicorns could exist, and ponies do.

As Wegmann noted while we walked back to the parking lot after spending the day with some of her favorite ponies, “The ponies will find a way.”

She was talking about their ability to escape the fences erected to confine them to the management area, but her comment also rings true for the ponies in general. They will find a way. ♦

Landmark Coal Ash Protections Under Attack

By Abby Hassler

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is planning to eviscerate important, hard-won regulations on coal ash, a toxic waste left after burning coal for energy. The agency aims to dismantle key provisions of the 2015 and 2024 coal combustion residuals rules, which were the first federal regulations on coal ash cleanup and storage.

The first rule was created in 2015 after two major coal ash spills occurred, including the 2008 disaster at the Tennessee Valley Authority's Kingston Fossil Plant. Years later, the 2024 legacy coal ash rule brought even more coal ash dumps under federal regulation nationwide. The EPA's latest proposal would exempt hundreds of coal ash dumps from regulation and delay the closure of many others, among other changes.

Coal ash contains a dangerous mix of cancer-causing chemicals, neurotoxins and other pollutants. Utilities stored coal ash in unlined landfills and pits for decades with no oversight until the 2015 coal ash rule passed. As a result, toxins leaked into nearby groundwater, pollut-



Jessica Waller-Downs holds a photo of her parents. She reads the comment sections of news articles about the recent EPA and TVA announcements. "I feel that there are a lot of people out there who really don't understand the potential dangers — the dangers of the coal ash," she says. Photo by Abby Hassler

ing drinking water and recreational waterways — a problem that persists today.

TVA has also scrapped plans to retire two of its old and costly coal plants, including its Kingston plant, the site of the largest industrial spill in U.S. history, which means more coal ash will be produced at that site.

"What in the world are they thinking?" says Jessica Waller-Downs, daughter of a late 2008 Kingston coal ash spill

cleanup worker. "Did they not learn from last time?"

Alongside hundreds of other workers, Waller-Downs' father, Ernest Hickman, spent over six years cleaning up 1.1 billion gallons of coal ash. He stood waist-deep in the ash, breathing it in and bringing it home on his clothes that his wife, Patsy, would wash. Neither TVA nor its primary cleanup contractor, Jacobs Engineering, provided personal protective equipment.

"They were told it was safe," Waller-Downs says. "Whenever I replay things like that in my head, I'm like, I couldn't believe you guys just lied to them."

She shares that the contractor told workers they would be fired if they were caught wearing masks — so they didn't.

"The men and women were making good money," she says. "They trusted [TVA and its contractors], and [TVA] failed them."

Years later, her parents' health began to deteriorate. In late 2015, she quit her job to stay home with her mom so her dad could work to keep his health insurance. Within a few months, her

dad started having strokes, mimicking some of her mom's symptoms.

"They got to where they couldn't walk," she says. "They could barely even use their hands. At that point, they had gotten to where they couldn't speak."

Her father passed away on Dec. 4, 2016. Her mother died on Sept. 19, 2018. They were 55 and 57 years old.

"I didn't get to hear my mama's voice before she passed; I didn't get to hear my dad's voice when he passed," she says.

On tough days, she cheers herself up by thinking about the funny things her dad used to do or say. He was the goof-ball of the family. She says her mom had a "heart of gold" and was never without a smile, even when she got sick.

"I will continue advocating for my parents," she says. "I will advocate for the other Kingston coal ash workers that don't have a voice that needs somebody to advocate for them. I'm not going anywhere. I'll be here from now until I guess the good Lord calls me home."

Groups such as Earthjustice, Appalachian Voices, the publisher of this newspaper, and other advocates are opposing the EPA's proposed coal ash protection rollbacks by encouraging the public to submit comments. Legal challenges to the rule are also expected.

Learn more and get involved at appvoices.org/coal-ash-2026. ♦

Chaos at the Tennessee Valley Authority, Cuts to Public Input

The past year has brought turmoil and uncertainty to the Tennessee Valley Authority, the nation's largest public power provider, and its more than 10 million customers across the Tennessee Valley.

In 2025, President Donald Trump fired three members of TVA's board of directors, leaving the governing body without the minimum number required to vote and make key decisions — only three of nine positions were filled.

In December 2025, the Senate confirmed four new members — nominated by the president — who were sworn into office in early 2026, bringing the board to quorum. The new board used its first

meeting to scrap longstanding plans to retire TVA's Kingston and Cumberland coal plants. The same month, the board's chair, Bill Renick, resigned.

Meanwhile, the renomination of controversial political megadonor Lee Beaman to the board hangs in the balance. The president proposed privatizing TVA in his first term, and some advocates are concerned that Beaman would go along with any push to sell TVA's publicly owned assets to private corporations.

"Communities in the Tennessee Valley have been paying for these assets over generations through our electric bills," wrote Bri Knisley, direc-

tor of public power campaigns at Appalachian Voices, in *The Tennessean*. "TVA belongs to and should be guided by us — not private shareholders or the politicians they fund."

The president also pressured the TVA board to fire the utility's relatively new CEO, Don Moul. Trump even declared during a White House event that he would "make [Moul's] life miserable." In March, a presidential memorandum demanded that the utility cap employees' salaries at \$500,000. Moul earned \$5.7 million in 2025. Soon after, Moul announced his retirement. In April, the TVA board selected Mike Skaggs as

interim president and CEO. Skaggs spent more than 20 years in leadership roles at the utility before his 2022 retirement.

TVA also revised its National Environmental Policy Act procedures to reduce and sometimes eliminate public involvement on its proposed projects.

All of this chaos has left TVA's Integrated Resource Plan up in the air. In 2025, the reduced board could not vote on the draft IRP, a long-term plan for the utility's power generation that will shape the region's energy future for the next 25 years. The board is set to vote on a new 2026 draft energy plan without a formal public comment period. — Abby Hassler



Inside Appalachian Voices



For nearly three decades, Appalachian Voices has stood shoulder-to-shoulder with our neighbors and partners to protect our region's natural areas from those who would destroy them for profit, and to advance practical, forward-thinking solutions that create good jobs and vibrant places to live. Here's how.

We fight for a healthy future.

Across Appalachia, we stand with communities to advocate for clean energy investments and common-sense policies that protect our wild places and boost local economies. Together, we elevate local voices to every level of government and before the courts when necessary – both in support of these solutions and in opposition to exploitation by the fossil fuel industry.

Our supporters help us:

- **Advocate for renewable energy** and a path to a clean power grid that's free of fossil fuels
- **Monitor the health of our streams and rivers**, which support native species like the candy darter and the Guyandotte River crayfish
- **Push back against more than a dozen dangerous and polluting proposals** in our region, including those aimed at propping up the coal industry, issuing mining permits, and building methane gas pipelines and power plants
- **Help residents of rural coal communities** gather and engage in participatory master-planning processes to build a stronger future
- **Defend the public's right to have their voices heard** when the government is making decisions about projects that impact our air, water, or public lands

WIN: Over the past four years, the Appalachian Solar Finance Fund has helped **72 coal-impacted communities** in six states build **88 new projects**, deploying **8.2 megawatts** of new solar energy.



We honor Appalachia's resilient and independent spirit.

The people of Appalachia are creative, resilient, independent and hardworking. When natural disasters strike, neighbors rally together to support one another in the near-term – and to find long-term solutions to build strong economies and be better prepared as the threat of climate disasters increases.

Our supporters help us:

- **Help community members advocate for and implement clean energy investments** like solar panels and energy storage on rural fire stations, community centers, schools, libraries and faith institutions, which aid emergency response during natural disasters, bolster resilience and save money year-round
- **Conduct workshops to help community members** understand, monitor and reduce their climate-driven risks, including the implementation of resident-led flood monitoring and warning systems in remote communities
- **Create a pathway to good-paying jobs** through an innovative apprenticeship program for rural communities
- **Share local news and stories** through The Advocate newsletter and The Appalachian Voice publication

WIN: In 2025, community opposition to new fracked-gas plants in Tennessee and Virginia **stopped two projects** from moving forward.



Left: A project to install solar on a Virginia retiree community is one of dozens we've helped make a reality through the Appalachian Solar Finance Fund. Right: Opponents of the Ridgeline methane gas pipeline gathered outside the Tennessee Valley Authority's headquarters

We right past wrongs and confront new harms.

Appalachian Voices has long fought for the rights of coal-impacted communities, including miners and their families. Coal's legacy of environmental harm and active mountaintop-removal mines continue to harm the land, air, water and health of our region, while the proposed build-out of 16 gigawatts of new methane gas infrastructure threatens the health and well-being of our communities, now and far into the future.

Our supporters help us:

- **Stop destructive coal mining activity** that threatens pristine ecosystems, including those on public lands
- **Heal former minelands** stripped bare and polluted by coal extraction
- **Defend key programs and improve benefits for miners** struggling with black lung, and fight for stronger safety standards to prevent the devastating disease
- **Use high-quality research** to demonstrate that investments in clean energy and energy efficiency can meet future power demands in our region
- **Ensure residents don't bear the financial cost or increased pollution** from rising power needs as corporations build energy-intensive data centers across the region

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Join our advocacy network to learn about opportunities to raise your voice to decision makers and the public about on important issues.

Volunteer with us. Your time helps us make more connections in communities across the region, uniting people to create lasting change.

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Your support helps us amplify the voices of the people of Appalachia and protect the land, air, water and communities of this beautiful region we call home.

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A Cape May warbler perches on pokeweed at Seven Islands State Birding Park in Kodak, Tennessee. These songbirds are one of around 200 documented bird species that enthusiasts can hope to spot at this 416-acre birding paradise, nestled along the French Broad River. Read about great hiking trails for birds throughout Appalachia on page 6! Photo by Kelly Fox

Appalachian Voices works to make life better in Appalachia, from our rural towns and cities to the region's abundant forests and streams.

Your support helps us bring people together to fight for a clean energy future and protect the mountains we call home.

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