

2024 Impact REPORT



LETTER FROM THE STATE DIRECTOR

Going Far, Together

My daughter turned 17 this past fall, and we went on our first official college tour in early October. Billie was six, and our son Tye was four, when we moved to Kentucky. Perhaps not surprisingly, I have been thinking about time and its seeming accelerating passage lately. As a dad, I celebrate milestones while simultaneously wishing they would accrue more slowly.

As a conservationist, I think about time a lot too, especially how to balance the urgency of the challenge with the patience often required to deliver the results we seek. The world faces increasingly significant threats from climate change and the loss of natural habitats and biodiversity, and our window to address these challenges is closing. This is, without question, the decade for action.

But the thoughtful, inclusive, and lasting work required to tackle the key threats to our natural world takes time. Building relationships and trust, often the key ingredients in our ultimate success, cannot be rushed.

I do not pretend that The Nature Conservancy has discovered the perfect way to balance urgent needs with deliberate work. However, one element of our approach is to ensure we are investing in projects that matter—bigger efforts that take more time but yield results far greater than what we produced in the past. Two projects not highlighted in this Impact Report—Green Heart and our Cumberland Forest easement (see 2024 Fall/Winter Field Notes)—are great examples of this “think big” approach. At over 54,500 acres, the Cumberland Forest easement delivered landscape-scale conservation in the globally important Appalachian Mountains. Green Heart, by demonstrating the power of trees to improve public health, has the potential to influence how we value and invest in nature in communities around the globe.



The projects included in this report continue this basic theme. TNC and partners delivered the largest freshwater restoration project in state history on the Green River, the proposed Starfire Solar Project is the largest solar on mine land project in the country, and TNC is leading a coalition pushing for Kentucky’s largest-ever investments in conservation.

None of these projects is quick or easy, but when completed, they matter. This is especially so because what we do in Kentucky does not exist in a vacuum but is instead connected to the coordinated efforts of colleagues and partners worldwide. For example, Cumberland Forest is a key project within our 18-state Appalachians Program. And dam removal on the Green River is part of a much larger stream restoration effort at TNC, from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Balkans.

Loyal and generous donors like you make it possible for us to address urgent challenges with patient, deliberate work. An African proverb says, “To go fast, go alone. To go far, go together.” I am so grateful we are in this work together. My very best for you and your family in 2025.

David Phemister
Kentucky State Director

FROM THE BOARD CHAIR

Adaptable Tenacity

Green River just downstream of
Lock and Dam #5 © Mike Wilkinson

In his essay on the preceding page, David talks about time and The Nature Conservancy's commitment to taking the time to do the work right. I have witnessed this firsthand in my six years serving on our Kentucky Board of Trustees, including two as our chair. Indeed, I have often marveled at the dogged commitment our staff display in the face of complex and prolonged challenges to completing a project or achieving a goal. Dogged does not fully capture it, however, as that might imply a stubbornness and rigidity in our approach when, in fact, flexibility and new ideas are embedded in how we navigate obstacles.

Our work removing dams on the Green River (see pages 5 and 6) provides a great illustration of our adaptable tenacity. When concerns over community water supply halted removal of Lock and Dam #5 on the Green River, many stakeholders saw a fundamental conflict. No dam meant no water. TNC saw a linked opportunity—removing the dam could pave the way for new and upgraded water supply infrastructure. No dam could instead mean better and more secure water supplies. But turning conflict into opportunity required better information, back-up options and a lot more trust.

So, with the support of our partners, we started the long, slow work fulfilling those requirements. More details are in the later story, and, as that article points out, The Nature Conservancy did not do this alone. We benefited from new leadership at the Corps of Engineers and the Edmonson County Water District (ECWD). But TNC led the efforts to keep hope alive when dam removal efforts were halted. We kept showing up and asking, "What can we do now?" By the end of the summer, Lock and Dam #5 was gone (ECWD never had to use the pump; the Corps updated models were accurate), and ECWD had secured state funding and was well positioned for a federal appropriation for new water infrastructure. A linked problem had become a shared solution.

We live in a world that seems both increasingly divided and increasingly incapable of bringing creativity, commitment and compromise to our collective problems, all of which are necessary to forge solutions. I find comfort and inspiration in TNC's approach. And when you serve on the board or simply support The Nature Conservancy's work, it is easy to become tenaciously loyal to the organization and its commitment to tangible, lasting results. I certainly am, and I thank all of you for your generosity, whether as a new supporter or long-time donor. Our work matters, our approach yields results, and your support makes a real difference.



Molly Yandell
Board Chair



Water

Dam Removal on the Green River
© Mike Wilkinson



Green River Lock and Dam #5
prior to removal efforts
©Mike Wilkinson

KENTUCKY 2024 IMPACT REPORT | WATER

A River Runs Through It

In late September 2024, under postcard blue skies on a beautiful fall day in Kentucky, Ricky Campbell and Hal Jones, contractors/partners extraordinaire, pulled the last piece of Lock and Dam #5 from the Green River. For the first time in well over a century, the Green River flowed through a small rapid between Warren and Butler counties unimpeded. Number Five, as we came to call it, was the last, largest and most difficult of the three lock and dam removals completed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and The Nature Conservancy. Green River Lock and Dam #6 and Barren River #1 went first. With Number Five's removal, we have achieved our goal of 200 miles of connected, free-flowing river—by far the largest river restoration project in Kentucky's history—and we celebrate this freshwater conservation milestone and all who made it happen.

The full story behind these removals is longer, more complicated, and...not fully complete.

This story started almost a decade ago when The Nature Conservancy convened a stakeholder meeting at Mammoth Cave National Park in May 2015 to discuss dam removals. After hours of discussion, TNC and partners learned a few things.

First, almost everyone in the room wanted a healthier, safer and more accessible Green River. Second, the community strongly opposed removing Green River Lock and Dam #3, and we quickly took that one off our list (Lock and Dams #1 and #2 are still operational and were never on the list; Lock and Dam #4 failed in a flood decades ago). Third, we had an ally in removal efforts in Senator Mitch McConnell, who saw the deteriorating locks and dams as a growing problem that needed a lasting solution.

Having Senator McConnell as an ally was essential, because starting the project required two rounds of enabling legislation and increased funding for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's dam removal program. Getting all those ingredients in place took strong advo-



CJ Aquatic Restoration hard at work on dam removal.
©Mike Wilkinson



cacy from The Nature Conservancy and patience and persistence from all the partners. Slowly but steadily, however, we made progress, removing Green River #6 in 2017 and Barren River #1 in 2022.

With about one-third of the dam removed, progress came to a halt on Green River #5 in 2022 when river levels at Edmonson County Water District's (ECWD) upstream intake dropped lower than originally predicted. All the partners took community water supplies seriously. The Nature Conservancy, with funding from the USFWS, had already provided an excellent back-up pump, but we also commissioned engineering studies on longer-term water supply solutions, which new leadership at the water district is using to secure state and federal funding for sorely needed water supply infrastructure upgrades. At the same time, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers updated and validated its river models using better and more recent data.

All these solutions allowed the partnership to restart work and finally complete removal of Green River #5 this summer. But as with most conservation wins, our success came down to people and partnerships. We salute and offer our special gratitude to Colonel Lisa Reynn Mann, commander of the USACE Louisville District; Kevin Shaw, director of ECWD; Lee Andrews, field supervisor

for the USFWS; Senator Mitch McConnell, Congressman Brett Guthrie, and their staffs; and Ricky Campbell and Hal Jones with CJ Aquatic Restoration, who worked 70-hour weeks throughout the summer to free a river.

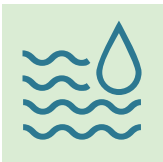
"We are so grateful for the many partners who made this success possible."

David Phemister, Kentucky State Director

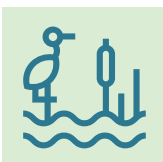
As mentioned earlier, our work is not complete. First, TNC will continue to support ECWD's efforts to secure necessary funding and approvals for new water supply infrastructure. Second, we have achieved a healthier and safer Green River, but work remains to fulfill our promise of a more accessible river. Once USACE transfers the land around the former dam sites to partners, we have real opportunities to improve access. Luckily, USACE expects those transfers to finally move forward in the coming weeks. Additionally, partners can get to work during low water next summer, extending boat ramps and conducting additional river clean-ups. Just as we worked through numerous challenges during removal, we will ensure locals and visitors alike have improved opportunities to access and enjoy these rivers. We hope you will be among those paddling on a free-flowing Green.



LOOKING AHEAD



In 2025, we have an emerging opportunity to address the health and connectivity of critical freshwater streams in the heart of Kentucky's Appalachian Mountains. Using best available science, we are focused on improving stream crossings and culverts and removing barriers to movement of fish and other species in these mountain streams. Improving culverts also reduces flood risk, enhances water quality and improves recreational access.



We will expand our wetland restoration work to the Lower Green River, working to enroll frequently flooded farmland into permanent conservation easements and restore back to native forest and wildlife habitat. The Lower Green is currently one of the largest contributors to nutrient pollution in the Ohio River Basin and historically has seen lower adoption of conservation incentives than other parts of the state.



Land

PURSUING CONSERVATION'S "HOLY GRAIL"

Dedicated State Funding

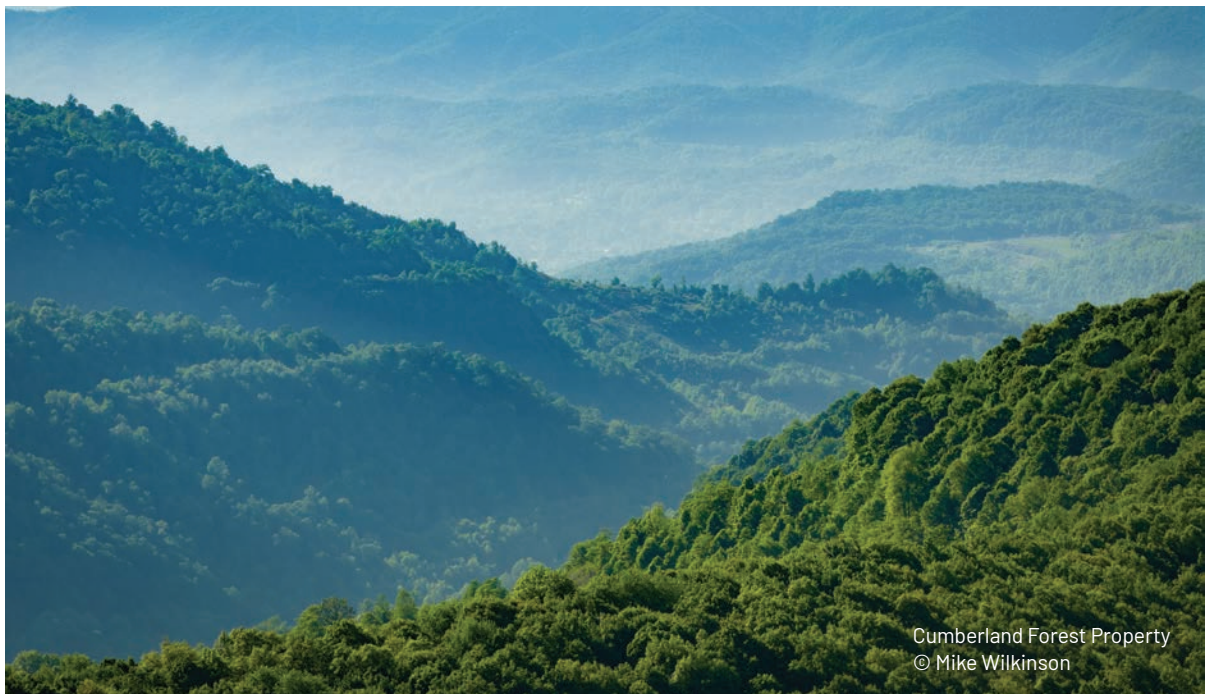
This year, The Nature Conservancy in Kentucky successfully led a coalition effort to secure additional funding for conservation from the Kentucky General Assembly. During the 2024 legislative session in Frankfort, TNC joined with other members of the Kentucky Land Trusts Coalition (KLTC) in advocating for a one-time additional investment into the Kentucky Heritage Land Conservation Fund (Heritage Fund), currently the commonwealth's only program for the acquisition of conservation lands. Since 1995, the Heritage Fund has supported 174 projects and conserved nearly 96,000 acres across 67 counties. But overall the resources and success of the Heritage Fund are in decline.

Revenue for the Heritage Fund comes from the sale of Kentucky nature license plates, a tax on unmined coal,

and environmental fines. However, each of these revenue streams has declined over the last several years, significantly impacting the fund's ability to acquire and protect conservation lands. In addition, the fund has been subject to budget sweeps into the General Fund, further diminishing its effectiveness.

Heather Jeffs, TNC's Kentucky director of external affairs, was elected to KLTC's Executive Committee in the fall of 2023 and immediately tapped to chair a new Advocacy Committee comprised of several KLTC member organizations from across the commonwealth.

"The urgency was clear. We had a very short window to coalesce around a funding request that coalition members could support in advance of the legislature's consideration of a new biennium budget," says Jeffs.



Cumberland Forest Property
© Mike Wilkinson



The coalition opted to advocate for a state appropriation of \$18 million to the Heritage Fund, representing the amount lost to budget sweeps over the last decade. Ultimately, the General Assembly appropriated just \$2 million in HB1, but we still considered it a victory. While lower than the coalition’s funding request, this represented the first direct investment in the Heritage Fund by the General Assembly in a generation and builds on momentum that TNC began two years ago when it secured a \$3.85 million appropriation to help leverage federal funding for an easement on the 54,560-acre Cumberland Forest Wildlife Management Area in eastern Kentucky.

And TNC has no plans to let this momentum wane.

Kentucky lags virtually all its peer states in public investments in land and water conservation. This underinvestment in the commonwealth’s natural resources is a chronic problem, but these recent investments by the Kentucky General Assembly show a growing recognition that conserving Kentucky’s lands and waters is not just a “nice to have” – but an essential investment in the state’s long-term prosperity.

“We know land conservation and outdoor recreation contribute billions of dollars to Kentucky’s economy, and we know that number could grow significantly with more conservation investments,” says Jeffs.

The Nature Conservancy is now working hard on a larger effort to increase dedicated funding for conservation in Kentucky. This spring, in coordination with our Global Conservation Campaigns team, TNC commissioned comprehensive assessments of the state’s land conservation needs and how we might meet them through additional state investments. This report focuses on the economic case for conservation, highlighting benefits from job creation and support for industries such as outdoor recreation, tourism, agriculture, forestry, and bourbon to critical flood control and the preservation of important Kentucky traditions like hunting and fishing. Increased conservation funding is not just an environmental necessity, but also a strategic economic investment for the state.

In her role with TNC and as Advocacy Committee chair for KLTC, Heather Jeffs will continue to coordinate with coalition partners and will use this report as part of a more comprehensive campaign around dedicated funding.

Discussions with legislators on increased investments in conservation are already underway and will continue during the 2025 legislative session. The coalition will take what it learns, bolster it with additional data from public polling and work to develop a specific legislative proposal for the 2026 session, the next time the General Assembly will approve a new budget.

“Securing dedicated public funding is a proven technique to increase the scale and impact of our conservation work, and it is a critical component to achieving TNC’s ambitious 2030 Goals.”

Heather Jeffs, Director of External Affairs,
TNC Kentucky

“There is a lot of work ahead, but we are excited about the opportunity to do something historic for Kentucky,” says Jeffs.



Contract planter swings to dig a hole for another native seedling on former mine land in Hazard County.
© Green Forests Work

LOOKING AHEAD



Reforestation of former mine lands

remains a priority in 2025, and with more sites on Cumberland Forest completing their permit-mandated reclamation, we have one tree planting already on the books and other opportunities under development.



We continue to work on improving recreation infrastructure

and amenities on the newly protected Cumberland Forest Wildlife Management Area. Located just outside of Middlesboro, Kentucky, and adjacent to Cumberland Gap National Historic Park, this 54,560-acre site has tremendous potential for hiking, mountain biking and birdwatching, in addition to hunting and fishing.



We are in early stage negotiations

and due diligence work on several large land protection projects in the Appalachians. All tracts are located within identified priority areas within the larger conservation corridor through these mountains.



Climate

Starfire Mine Site, Breathitt County, KY
©Mike Wilkinson

CLIMATE, CONSERVATION, AND COMMUNITIES

Solar Power on Kentucky Mine Lands

The Starfire mine, once one of the largest surface mines in the United States, is poised for a dramatic transformation as the Starfire Renewable Energy Center. Developed by BrightNight, a global renewable power producer, and with Rivian Automotive Inc. as a key partner to purchase the power, the proposed project represents a more sustainable continuation of the long legacy of energy production in Kentucky's Appalachian Mountains. Once all four phases and 800 megawatts of capacity are complete, this project will represent the largest solar on mine lands project in the nation. It would also represent a more than \$1 billion infrastructure investment into Breathitt, Perry and Knott counties.

Although the scale of this project is notable, its location on former mine lands is also a critical component.

“Renewable energy is critically important, but these projects have a big spatial footprint,” says Danna Baxley, TNC’s director of conservation for Kentucky. “Siting projects on mine lands and brownfields is an incredible strategy for avoiding conversion of other higher-value lands.”

We need pilot projects to demonstrate the feasibility of developing solar on mine lands, and the Starfire project is on the leading edge of solving the technical challenges of these sites, including instability, outstanding mining permits and uncertainty around interconnection to the existing power grid.

Although technical challenges are vast, the greater challenge and opportunity is to demonstrate that renewable energy in the Appalachians can meet community and conservation goals in addition to providing climate benefits. Collectively, we call these the 3C framework, and we think success on all three is essential for renewable energy to fulfill its true promise for people and the planet.

Over the past year, we have focused on fleshing out the details behind the conservation and community co-benefits of the project. While more work lies ahead, thanks to lots of work from TNC staff in Kentucky and our Global Renewable Energy team, the project’s state siting board application will include wildlife-friendly fencing, wildlife corridors designed to allow north/south movement through the site, pollinator plantings, and increased attention to understanding and mitigating flood risk for the site.

BrightNight and Rivian Automotive Inc. are also committed to community investment, investments that go beyond tax payments and direct job creation. The Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky, a nonprofit based in Hazard, Kentucky, has been a key partner in the Starfire project. Again, more work lies ahead to formalize agreements, but we remain optimistic that the community will see tangible benefits from the project.

“Projects like Starfire hold immense potential for transforming Appalachia, especially when local communities are true partners and involved fully in the process”

Kristin Walker-Collins, Executive Director
Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky

Balancing economics, community investment and conservation is difficult, and Starfire is not yet a proven example. But the opportunity is there, and, if successful, this project will offer a new model for energy transition in Appalachia, a model where communities are at the forefront as partners, siting and design deeply integrate conservation principles, and a project’s community and conservation co-benefits are linked to its economic viability.

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DONOR SPOTLIGHT

Lucy Lloyd

I went to college at Washington & Lee University, and the breathtaking beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains and Shenandoah Valley ignited my love for the outdoors. College was a pivotal time when I, like so many others, began to make my own choices about where and how I wanted to spend my time. I realized I wanted to immerse myself in nature. After graduation, I lived in the Pacific Northwest for a decade, captivated by its abundant natural beauty. Now, back in Kentucky, I actively seek natural spaces, rediscovering the beauty of my home state through the eyes of my children and community.

The more I learn about The Nature Conservancy and its holistic and collaborative approach, the more it resonates with my personal philanthropy and my family foundation's philosophy on giving. In our family, we deeply value a longstanding commitment to future generations. Our focus is not on ourselves or our family, but on the larger narrative of life—how it enriches us and how we can enrich it.



This philosophy guides our charitable giving, and we support organizations that share this mindset. This is why we have been drawn to The Nature Conservancy; they are focused on present action, but lasting benefits—a commitment to a more sustainable future for nature and people.

As a donor to TNC, I've discovered that there is as much to gain as there is to give. I'm proud to contribute to this critical work, which allows everyone to find hope and make a difference.

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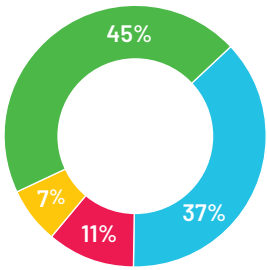


Green Heart tree plantings,
Wyandotte Park, Louisville.
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BY THE NUMBERS

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Conservation Land & Easements	\$15,606,282	\$13,933,776
Investments Held for Conservation Projects	\$3,349,262	\$3,260,109
Endowment Investments	\$5,430,191	\$5,300,591
Property & Equipment – Net of Depreciation	\$305,823	\$341,000
Right of Use Asset	–	\$73,310
Current Assets	\$3,354,144	\$2,799,534
Other Assets	\$11,966	\$24,208
Total Assets	\$28,057,668	\$25,732,528

LIABILITY AND NET ASSET SUMMARY		
Liabilities	\$1,833,482	\$392,008
Net Assets	\$26,224,186	\$25,340,520
Total Liabilities & Net Assets	\$28,057,668	\$25,732,528

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45% | Individuals

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