Tennessee Citizens FOR Wilderness Planning
Taking Care of Wild Places

January 2025
Newspaper No.379
Issn 1089-6104

TCWP Newsletter

HHM
CERTIFIED PUBLIC ACCOUNTANTS

TCWP extends its heartfelt appreciation to HHM CPAs for their generous sponsorship of our Giving Tuesday campaign. HHM provided the critical boost we needed to successfully launch our first Giving Tuesday effort, which resulted in the formation of TCWP's newly minted "Happy Dance Crew."

If you're looking for an exceptional CPA firm that can expertly manage your finances while supporting great nonprofits like ours, be sure to give HHM CPAs a shout!

INSIDE TCWP

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Anyah Ballard
Oak Ridge High School - 12th Grade

Gabriella Mirodipini
Jefferson Middle School

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Support TCWP

by donating, joining, or renewing your membership at TCWP.org

TCWP Board Meeting

The Officers and Directors of Tennessee Citizens for Wilderness Planning meet the third Thursday of each month.

Members are welcome to call, email, or attend a board meeting to raise issues that TCWP needs to address. We welcome your input.

We are thrilled to announce the winners of our student logo competition: Anyah, a high school student, and Gabriella, a middle school student. Their designs reflect remarkable creativity, passion, and dedication to our mission of protecting wild places.

Anyah's logo is currently being refined for digital presentation by graphic designer Kassandra Monroe. Once completed, it will take a prominent place on our new website, which is being developed by New Frame Creative. While the launch date for the website is not yet finalized, we can't wait to share it with you—stay tuned!

Gabriella's logo will play a key role in representing our youth education initiatives, such as Explore and Restore, and will inspire young minds to connect with nature and conservation.

We are deeply honored by the commitment, talent, and effort these students have poured into their designs. Their work not only reflects their artistic abilities but also their dedication to making a meaningful impact. Thank you, Anyah and Gabriella, for sharing your vision with us!

2. TCWP Seeks Two Board Members

We invite you to review the job posting on our LinkedIn profile, here: LinkedIn
For non-digital readers:
https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7279532296162971648/
We hope you will pass on the job posting to anyone you think would be passionate about our mission.

3. TCWP Announces the First Founder's Award

At this year's annual meeting, TCWP proudly introduced the Founder's Award, honoring individuals whose dedication and commitment embody our founding principles.

The inaugural recipient is Jean Bangham, a founding member of TCWP whose remarkable story reminds us how a small group can achieve big victories. In 1966, Jean helped rally against the proposed North Shore Road through the Smokies and a dam on the Obed River. As TCWP's first Treasurer, she charged $1.00 for charter memberships, uniting a group of 30 dedicated individuals.

Jean famously hiked 17 miles of the proposed North Shore Road route to protest its construction and later hiked the same 17 miles to celebrate its cancellation. Even decades later, Jean's dedication remains steadfast. She is a familiar and inspiring presence at stewardship events, trusty loppers in hand, embodying TCWP's spirit of action, advocacy and protection.

Thank you, Jean, for your tireless efforts and enduring legacy!

4. TCWP History Party

📅**Date: February 12**
🕐 **Time: 10:00 AM – 2:00 PM**
🍴 **Lunch Provided**

Join us for a special day dedicated to preserving TCWP's 58+ years of rich history!
We've accumulated a treasure trove of documents and memories, and it's time to get them organized so we can better celebrate and share our legacy.

Leading the charge is our fearless organizer and resident history expert, Don Barger. Not only will he guide us through sorting and categorizing by year and topic, but if we're lucky, he'll also share some fascinating stories from TCWP's early days.

Your help will be invaluable, and we promise good food, great company, and a chance to dive into TCWP's inspiring past.

📧 **RSVP** to Nancy at nancymanning@tcwp.org so we can plan lunch accordingly.

We can't wait to see you there!

5. TCWP Receives Grant from Oak Ridge National Laboratory

We are thrilled to announce that TCWP has been awarded a $6,500 grant from Oak Ridge National Laboratory to support two critical initiatives. This funding includes $4,500 for our **Explore and Restore program,** which empowers students to engage in hands-on science and habitat restoration while fostering a commitment to environmental stewardship. This year, the program will expand to Robertsville Middle School, a Title One school, where 80 seventh-grade students will participate in activities like soil science, botany, zoology, and hydrology. With guidance from scientists and mentors, students will explore wetlands, develop STEM skills, and develop and implement a restoration project on school grounds.

An additional $2,000 will support TCWP's stewardship efforts at our five managed natural areas, including the Cedar Barrens, home to one of Tennessee's last remaining prairie ecosystems. These funds will provide much-needed resources, like lunch for volunteers during stewardship days, as we continue invasive species removal, trail maintenance, and educational programming. We extend our heartfelt thanks to ORNL for their generous support, helping us inspire the next generation of environmental scientists and to preserve our natural habitats for future generations.

OUR WORK

1. Rails to Trails – Oneida as the Engine That Could

On November 19, 2024, Oneida Mayor Lori Phillips-Jones hosted a significant **Rails to Trails** meeting in Oneida, facilitated by Tom Lamb from the Office of Outdoor Recreation and Jenni Veal from the Tennessee Department of Tourism. Approximately 60 attendees participated, including representatives from the National Salvage Company, R.J. Corman Railroad Property, Scott County officials, small business owners, a National Rails to Trails Conservancy representative, and employees from the Trust for Public Land. Several landowners were also present, including some who voiced opposition to the project.

On December 8, Mayor Phillips-Jones convened another meeting in Oneida, forming a 15-person working group that continues to grow. Among the key members are John McCracken and Ralph Trieschmann, both lodge owners in Scott County, who are taking the lead in establishing a Rails to Trails nonprofit and spearheading fundraising efforts.

Key Steps Forward

The Oneida group has identified the following initial steps to advance the project:

- **Landowner Engagement:** Organizing small, neighbor-to-neighbor meetings along the 27 miles of the trail in Scott County to address concerns and foster support among landowners and local officials.
- **Nonprofit Formation:** Initiating the process to incorporate as a nonprofit organization in Tennessee and subsequently apply for 501(c)(3) status with the IRS. While awaiting nonprofit recognition, the group will start fundraising to cover the cost of a necessary appraisal.
- **Trail Access Management:** Collaborating with the National Salvage Company to install barriers preventing ATV use on sections of the trail where rails have been removed, addressing a primary concern of landowners.

TCWP's Work

On the home front, in December, TCWP filed a **Request for Extension** with the Surface Transportation Board (STB) to extend the negotiation period for trail use with R.J. Corman Railroad Property, LLC (RJC) by another year, until April 17, 2026. RJC supports this extension request. If approved, this extension will provide additional time for negotiations to secure an agreement for the corridor's purchase.

Critical Milestones

For the project to progress:

- **Ownership Agreement:** Negotiations must conclude by the STB deadline, resulting in an entity stepping forward to purchase the corridor, assume liability, and establish a payment agreement.
- **Appraisal Funding:** An appraisal, estimated to cost up to $40,000, is a vital prerequisite for negotiating ownership terms.

While trail construction cannot begin until ownership is finalized, the National Salvage Company has expressed interest in constructing the trail. **Trail management**, however, remains a separate issue and may involve one or more entities.

How You Can Help

An accurate appraisal is essential to moving the project forward. If you would like to support fundraising efforts for the appraisal, please contact Nancy Manning at nancymanning@tcwp.org.

2. Pellissippi Blueway: Selected for National Park Service Assistance and Invited to Statewide Blueway Planning

The National Park Service (NPS) has announced its support for the **Pellissippi Blueway Plan**, providing guidance on development, community engagement, and process facilitation through the expertise of consultant Allison Bullock. Our Pellissippi Blueway group continues to meet monthly, focusing on key aspects of planning, including mapping access points and finalizing a **Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)** among group members.

A key component of the MOU is our **Vision and Values:**

> "The Parties share a common interest in the conservation and recreation of the wild lands and waters of the Clinch River and recognize the importance of establishing and maintaining a water trail on the Clinch River to facilitate recreational activities, promote environmental conservation, and enhance public access to the river. The Parties envision the Pellissippi Blueway as a regional recreation trail on the Clinch River that benefits visitors and local communities through partnerships that celebrate the area's rich natural and cultural resources."

Statewide Blueway Strategic Planning

Our group was also invited to participate in Tennessee's **statewide Blueway Strategic Planning Process** as part of the Tennessee Blueway Initiative. Tennessee boasts **61,000 miles of navigable waters**, with each river possessing its own unique characteristics. The initiative, led by a Steering Committee, aims to create a **Statewide Strategic Plan** by March 31, 2025. Once completed, the focus will shift to implementation at the local level.

The state defines a Blueway as a **Recreational River Corridor**, primarily for paddle craft but accessible to other users as well. Being a corridor, the concept extends beyond the river itself to include surrounding areas. Across Tennessee, 15 rivers have been identified for this initiative, divided among three regions. In **East Tennessee**, the selected rivers include:

- Clinch River
- French Broad River
- Emory River
- Nolichucky River
- Hiwassee River

Defining Blueway Features

The Steering Committee identified several essential features that every Blueway should encompass:

1. **Recreation Component with Access:** Includes both passive access (e.g., picnic areas, wildlife observation) and active access points, fostering community health and engagement.
2. **Economic Viability:** Opportunities for local commerce that connect communities to their rivers.
3. **Access Types:** Access points should be spaced no more than 5–7 miles apart, though this can vary depending on local features (e.g., wildlife management areas).
4. **Scenic Value:** Highlighting the natural beauty of the river.
5. **Natural Resources:** Including water quality as a critical component of public messaging.
6. **Cultural Significance:** Emphasizing the unique cultural aspects of each river.
7. **Management Plan:** Developed in partnership with agencies like TDEC, with multiple partners required for successful implementation.
8. **Safety:** Addressing the serious issue of paddle sport safety, as Tennessee led the nation in paddle sport fatalities in 2020 and 2021.
9. **Messaging:** Clear and effective communication to connect communities to their rivers.

The Importance of Community

The Steering Committee emphasized the role of community identity in Blueway planning. Each river tells a story and becomes part of the cultural fabric of its region. For the Clinch River, this connection runs deep, and we are excited to share its story with you and an even broader audience.

3. TCWP Invited to Participate in Oak Ridge Comprehensive Planning Process

TCWP's Board President and Executive Director recently attended a meeting hosted by the City of Oak Ridge to contribute to the development of the city's new comprehensive plan, **Oak Ridge 2045: A Century of Heritage, A Future of Promise.** The plan's name was chosen through an online poll, where 173 participants voted for their favorite title.

The meeting was facilitated by two consultants retained by the City of Oak Ridge and divided into two focus groups. TCWP participated in the **Natural Assets Advocates** group, which included representatives from organizations such as AFORR, Pellissippi Blueway, Legacy Parks, Clinch Valley Trail Alliance, Greenways Oak Ridge, and the City's Recreation & Parks Department. The composition of the other group remains a mystery—we're still curious!

The consultants explained that this comprehensive plan builds on the **2019 Blueprint**, which established the core values of **Natural Assets, Science and Technology, and Education**. The objectives of the new plan are focused on **Economic Viability** and **Sustainable Growth**.

During the session, participants engaged in a guided discussion starting with the question, "What are Oak Ridge's strengths?" Each group was encouraged to share their perspectives in a conversational format.

We later inquired whether a summary of the meeting would be shared and were informed that the consultants are currently compiling raw notes from over 14 hours of meetings into a report. We look forward to reviewing these reports once they're posted!

4. Ridgeline Expansion Gas Pipeline: FERC issues final EIS

As you may recall, TCWP filed a **Motion to Intervene** in the FERC process for the gas pipeline project and joined the SELC letter urging the NPS Regional Director to issue a negative opinion under Section 7 of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to prevent the project from proceeding.

6. NL 379, January 2025

In our November newsletter (page 9), we incorrectly stated that the Ridgeline Expansion Gas Pipeline crossed the Obed Wild and Scenic River. To clarify, the pipeline will cross 19 upstream tributaries within the Obed Wild and Scenic River system. Of these, 17 crossings will employ **dry-ditch open-cut techniques**, which are likely to have devastating environmental impacts.

The **dry-ditch open-cut technique** involves excavating a trench along the pipeline route and laying the pipeline directly into it. The "dry" method temporarily diverts or manages water to prevent flooding the trench and allows construction to proceed in relatively dry conditions. Below is a summary of the process:

1. **Clearing and Grading:** Vegetation is removed, and the surface is leveled along the route.
2. **Trenching:** A trench is excavated to the required depth using heavy machinery, often involving bedrock blasting.
3. **Pipe Installation:** Sections of the pipeline are lowered into the trench and welded together.
4. **Backfilling:** The trench is refilled with excavated material to cover the pipeline.
5. **Restoration:** Final steps include cleaning and testing the pipeline and attempting to restore the construction workspace.

This construction method can cause severe and lasting environmental damage, including:

- **Soil erosion and sedimentation**, which can harm aquatic habitats.
- **Vegetation loss**, leading to habitat destruction for wildlife.
- **Stream and river crossings,** which increase the risk of sedimentation and contamination.

Despite these risks, the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) introduction claims:
"The final EIS assesses the potential environmental effects of the construction and operation of the Project in accordance with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The FERC staff concludes that approval of the proposed Project would have some limited adverse environmental effects; however, with implementation of East Tennessee's impact avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures, as well as adherence to the mitigation measures recommended in the EIS, these effects would be avoided, mitigated, or reduced to less-than-significant levels."
20241220-3002_RidgelineExpansion_FEIS_Part 1_wAppendices A-G (3).pdf

What's Next?
Several regulatory hurdles remain before the pipeline can move forward.

> "The next step will likely be the issuance of a Certificate Order for Public Convenience and Necessity, which authorizes construction. However, the pipeline cannot be installed until all other permits are obtained, such as the 404 Permit under the Clean Water Act. Enbridge will also require permits from TDEC and the NPS. The 404 Permit cannot be issued until the FERC process is complete. While FERC has a 99% approval rate, Enbridge could still encounter challenges obtaining the other permits." (TCWP November newsletter, page 5)

Stay Tuned
We will continue to monitor this project and advocate for the protection of the Obed Wild and Scenic River system. Your support is critical in ensuring these wild places remain protected.

SPECIAL to our NEWSLETTER

Southern rivers threatened by pipeline plans: SELC interviews TCWP members, Keith and Sue Havens

Keith and Sue Havens, long-time residents near Tennessee's White Creek, are speaking out against the proposed Ridgeline Pipeline, which would transport methane gas to TVA's planned Kingston Gas Plant. Known for its pristine waters and recreational opportunities, the creek is a gateway to the Obed Wild and Scenic River system, cherished by the Havenses for its natural beauty and economic contributions to the area.

"This place is just amazing. But if you have a gas line cutting across, that changes everything," Sue said, noting the environmental and aesthetic harm already visible from an existing pipeline near their home. Keith expressed concerns about the risks posed by the project: "With the number of crossings, there's a lot of opportunities for mistakes. And the consequences can be high." The couple fears the project could devastate the region's waterways, which are vital to the local ecosystem and economy, particularly for whitewater recreation and freshwater snorkeling, which rely on the area's exceptionally clean water.

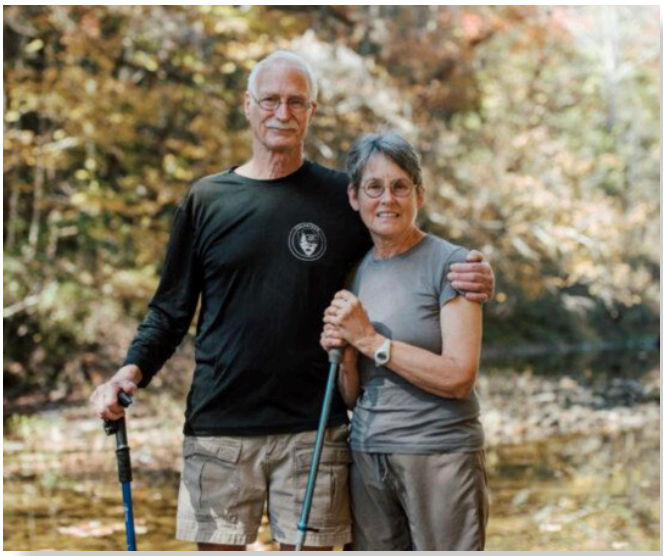

Photo by (Kristian Thacker) of SELC

The Havenses also criticize the broader implications of TVA's reliance on fossil fuels. "Continuing to focus on fossil fuels as our energy is backwards thinking," Keith stated, pointing out that the Ridgeline Pipeline would cross tributaries critical to the Obed River's health. Sue highlighted the economic stakes, noting, "When the water is up, there's a steady stream of cars with boats... That brings dollars to the local economy here, and that's important."

The pipeline project has drawn scrutiny for potential long-term damage to waterways, deforestation, and the use of destructive construction methods. The Havenses worry the natural beauty and wildlife of the region, which they describe as unparalleled, could be irreversibly lost if the pipeline moves forward. "To ruin something so beautiful and so important, you don't get it back the way it was," Sue concluded.

Find full article here: Southern rivers threatened by pipeline plans - Southern Environmental Law Center

URL: https://www.southernenvironment.org/news/southern-rivers-threatened-by-pipeline-plans/

CONSERVATION DAY ON THE HILL

TCWP will Join Harpeth Conservancy, Tennessee Environmental Council, Sierra Club and Tennessee Interfaith Power $ Light at Conservation Day on the Hill. We'll chat with our legislators about the importance of protecting our environment in Tennessee!

This is an opportunity for folks across the state to join us and our partner organizations at the Tennessee State Capitol in Nashville. We'll schedule meetings with legislators and split up into groups by district to discuss key legislative priorities with them –including the protection of Tennessee's wetlands and the Tennessee Waste Reduction & Recycling Act. This event is a great opportunity to meet like-minded people and an excellent opportunity for anyone new to policy advocacy. No experience necessary!

Training provided! We'll have a hybrid training session on February 24th – in-person with a Zoom option. REGISTER HERE

RSVP URL: https://interland3.donorperfect.net/weblink/weblink.aspx?name=E12925&id=137

NEWS CAPSULES

OAK RIDGE

1. Oak Ridge will be Home to the First Electricity-Producing Generation IV Reactor to Receive Approval in US

Kairos Power, a California-based company, has received the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission's approval of a construction permit for its Hermes 2 reactor in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. This marks the first electricity-producing Generation IV reactor to receive such approval in the United States.

Building on the work of its predecessor, the Hermes demonstration reactor, Hermes 2 will generate power for the grid using a fluoride salt-cooled design, an innovative departure from traditional water-cooled reactors. Hermes 2 is scheduled to become operational in 2027. Both reactors are located at Oak Ridge's Heritage Center Industrial Park. The Department of Energy has committed up to $303 million to support these efforts.

In a significant boost to its ambitions, Kairos has secured partnerships with tech giants Google and Amazon, who are increasingly interested in nuclear energy to power their operations sustainably. Google plans to purchase energy from Kairos reactors deployed near its data centers, aiming for a fleet totaling 500 megawatts by 2035. Similarly, Amazon has partnered with X-energy, another advanced nuclear developer, to fund the design of small modular reactors and a fuel production facility in Oak Ridge. These collaborations underscore a growing trend where nuclear energy is being integrated into the clean energy strategies of technology companies to meet the increasing demands of AI data centers while reducing carbon footprints – hopefully!

2. Centrus invests $60M for Centrifuges to Replace Russian Reliance with Oak Ridge Innovation

Centrus Energy is investing $60 million to resume centrifuge production at its Technology and Manufacturing Center in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, aiming to reduce U.S. reliance on Russian uranium imports. The facility, a former Boeing plant, is the hub for developing Centrus' American Centrifuge technology, which uses advanced carbon fiber rotors to enrich uranium gas. With this investment, Centrus plans to triple its Oak Ridge workforce to 450 employees and expand operations at its Ohio enrichment facility, which currently houses 16 centrifuges but has capacity for thousands more. The initiative aligns with the U.S. pledge to triple nuclear energy capacity by 2050, highlighting nuclear energy's role as a significant carbon-free power source and addressing the critical domestic fuel supply gap created by reliance on foreign sources.

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) has allocated billions to boost domestic uranium enrichment, selecting Centrus among four companies to advance production of high-assay, low-enriched uranium (HALEU) and traditional low-enriched uranium. These fuels are vital for traditional and advanced nuclear reactors, both of which are essential to meeting the U.S.'s clean energy goals. With recent geopolitical tensions, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine and subsequent restrictions on uranium exports, the urgency for domestic production has grown. Companies like Centrus and Orano, which plans a multibillion-dollar enrichment plant in Oak Ridge, are critical to expanding U.S. nuclear capabilities. However, industry leaders emphasize the need for robust DOE funding to ensure sustainable growth and achieve the nation's ambitious energy goals.

3. New Degree in Nuclear Engineering

Tennessee Tech University has launched a new bachelor's degree in nuclear engineering, supported by partnerships in Oak Ridge aimed at addressing workforce needs in the region's growing nuclear and environmental cleanup industries. The program, only the second of its kind in Tennessee, was developed with input from UCOR and other Oak Ridge leaders to align with the industry's needs and provide students with hands-on experience, research opportunities, and scholarships. With 23 students in its inaugural class and projections to enroll 50 within five years, the program aims to bolster the state's nuclear engineering workforce, supporting decades of ongoing projects in Oak Ridge and beyond.

STATE of TENNESSEE

1. Governor Lee signs Order to Preserve Duck River and Promote Water Resource Management Statewide.

Tennessee Governor Bill Lee has signed Executive Order 108 to establish the Duck River Watershed Planning Partnership, aiming to balance economic growth with water resource management and environmental conservation. Recognized as North America's most biologically diverse freshwater river and a critical water source for 250,000 Tennesseans, the Duck River is also vital to the state's outdoor recreation economy. The Partnership will develop sustainable watershed management strategies, promote habitat conservation, and address water system regionalization and drought resilience. Additionally, the Order directs state agencies to identify priority watersheds, enhance wastewater treatment, and support urban stormwater management to ensure the long-term sustainability of Tennessee's water resources.

2. New Tennessee State Forest Announced

The Tennessee Department of Agriculture Division of Forestry has announced the creation of Wolf River State Forest, the state's 16th state forest, spanning 5,477 acres in Fayette County and set to open in 2025. Located on a portion of the historic Ames Plantation, the forest boasts exceptional bottomland hardwoods, 30 miles of streams, 1,560 acres of wetlands, and 45 state-registered historical sites, including areas documenting the lives of over 800 enslaved people. Managed to conserve its natural and cultural resources, the forest will also support white oak restoration, water quality for Memphis, and passive recreation activities such as hiking, hunting, and wildlife viewing. This acquisition was made possible through partnerships with The Conservation Fund and funding from the USDA Forest Service Forest Legacy Program, ensuring long-term environmental, economic, and historical preservation for Tennessee.

3. Renewable Energy Reliability Confirmed by UT

A study by the University of Tennessee, published in Nature Energy, has found that integrating wind and solar energy into power grids enhances grid resilience during extreme weather, debunking concerns about renewable energy reliability. Analyzing over 2,000 blackout events across 278 U.S. cities, the research revealed that regions with high renewable energy infrastructure experienced fewer severe blackouts compared to those reliant on traditional power sources. The study challenges misconceptions, such as those surrounding the 2021 Texas blackouts, which were attributed to grid issues unrelated to renewables. These findings suggest that renewable energy not only supports sustainability but also strengthens grid stability, offering critical insights for future energy infrastructure and modernization strategies.

4. Students Aid Scientists in Effort to Restore Ancient Fish to Tennessee River

Fifth graders from Brown Academy joined scientists and educators from the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute (TNACI) to release 500 juvenile Lake Sturgeon into the Tennessee River in downtown Chattanooga, marking the latest effort in a 24-year restoration project. Once extinct in the river due to overfishing, damming, and poor water quality, Lake Sturgeon have been reintroduced gradually since 1998, thanks to improved conditions under the Clean Water Act and the dedication of the Lake Sturgeon Working Group. The fish, raised from eggs sourced from healthy populations in Wisconsin, represent a significant step in restoring this ancient species, known for its longevity and impressive size, to its natural habitat. "It's awesome to see the next generation of conservation scientists out here releasing these fish with us," said TNACI biologist Sarah Kate Bailey.

Although nearly half a million sturgeon have been reintroduced to the Tennessee River and Cumberland River watersheds, scientists are still awaiting signs of natural reproduction, a process slowed by the species' long maturation period—females take at least 20 years to become reproductive. The first reintroduced sturgeon are only now reaching maturity, offering hope that this critical milestone may soon be achieved. Bailey emphasized the significance of involving students in these efforts, noting that "by the time these fifth graders are old enough to enter their careers, we may be seeing Lake Sturgeon successfully re-established in the Tennessee River." Their participation highlights the importance of long-term conservation and inspires future stewards of the environment.

5. TN Water Infrastructure Gets $3.6 Billion in Federal Funding

Tennessee will receive $3.6 billion in federal funding from the Biden-Harris Administration's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to upgrade its water infrastructure, bringing the total investment for Fiscal Year 2025 to $6.2 billion. The funds, part of a historic $50 billion nationwide initiative, aim to modernize wastewater systems, protect freshwater resources, and provide safe drinking water. EPA Administrator Michael S. Regan highlighted the importance of addressing issues like lead contamination, PFAS, sewer overflows, and climate resilience, emphasizing that the upgrades will create jobs and ensure clean water access for all. Acting Regional Administrator Jeaneanne Gettle reinforced the critical link between clean water, public health, and economic growth, as this investment tackles aging infrastructure and environmental challenges.

6. Data Centers: High Energy Demands, Low Regard for Communities.

Data centers, which house the computing hardware that powers digital services, are rapidly expanding across the South due to affordable land and state tax incentives. These facilities consume 10 to 50 times more energy than typical commercial buildings, raising environmental and energy concerns. Their high electricity demands often lead utilities to propose constructing new fossil fuel plants, such as methane gas facilities, potentially slowing the transition to clean energy. In Tennessee, for example, xAI, a company founded by Elon Musk, opened a data center in South Memphis in 2024, operating unpermitted methane gas turbines to meet its power needs. These turbines are worsening air quality and perpetuating a legacy of environmental injustice in predominantly Black neighborhoods already burdened by industrial pollution. Local and federal leaders are being urged to enforce permitting requirements to mitigate these impacts.

The growth of data centers underscores the need for sustainable planning to balance technological advancements with environmental priorities. Policymakers, utilities, and tech companies must work together to ensure that this expansion aligns with climate goals. Solutions include leveraging clean energy resources like solar and wind, revisiting tax incentives to favor environmentally responsible data centers, and improving transparency about energy and water use. Utility commissions should increase oversight of data center agreements to protect other customers and prioritize long-term sustainability over short-term growth incentives.

TVA Approves Power Agreement with Elon Musk, Dismissing Community Concerns

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) Board of Directors has approved a power agreement for xAI, Elon Musk's data center in South Memphis, despite community concerns over its impact on air quality, power grid reliability, and environmental justice. The facility, which supports the AI chatbot "Grok," initially requires 150 megawatts of electricity—enough to power 100,000 homes—but plans to double its energy use by the end of 2024. Critics, including local activists and environmental groups, argue that the unpermitted gas turbines currently powering xAI are worsening air pollution in predominantly Black neighborhoods already burdened by industrial pollution. Concerns also center on TVA's reliance on costly new gas plants to meet industrial demand, which has contributed to recent rate hikes. Community leaders have called for greater accountability and a focus on protecting vulnerable populations, accusing TVA of prioritizing corporate interests over public health and sustainability.

7. Court Temporarily Halts Construction of Tennessee Pipeline

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the 6th Circuit has temporarily halted construction of the Kinder Morgan Cumberland Pipeline by pausing the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation's water quality certification and the construction permits issued by both Tennessee and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. This 32-mile pipeline is intended to deliver natural gas to a Tennessee Valley Authority facility transitioning from coal. However, the court acknowledged its decision to stay construction is temporary and subject to further review. Environmental groups, led by the Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC), argue the pipeline permits were improperly granted, ignoring potential long-term environmental harm. SELC's legal challenge focuses on sections 401 and 404 of the Clean Water Act, with oral arguments set for December.

At the federal level, the project faces additional scrutiny. A lawsuit in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia claims the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) failed to fully address climate change implications when approving the project earlier in 2024. Environmentalists argue that FERC's lack of an established method to calculate the impact of greenhouse gas emissions undermines its decisions. Kinder Morgan, meanwhile, defends the pipeline as vital for replacing coal-fired power plants with cleaner natural gas, citing a net reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. The company is evaluating its options to proceed with the project amid growing resistance from environmental advocates and ongoing legal battles.

NATIONAL NEWS CAPSULES

1. National Park Service Responds to Public Comments about Foothills Parkway

The National Park Service (NPS) is conducting additional design and technical studies for the proposed Foothills Parkway Section 8D, a 9-mile extension connecting Wears Valley to the Spur near Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. This decision follows public and expert feedback received during a 30-day comment period. While construction on several sections of the 72-mile parkway is complete, middle sections, including 8D, remain unfinished. The NPS will reinitiate the National Environmental Policy Act process and provide future public engagement opportunities as plans progress.

2. Supreme Court Allows Rule Limiting Pollution from Coal-Fired Power Plants to Remain in Effect for now

The Supreme Court has allowed a Biden administration regulation targeting carbon pollution from coal-fired power plants to remain in effect while legal challenges proceed. The rule, a critical component of President Biden's climate goals, requires coal plants to capture 90% of carbon emissions or shut down within eight years, though compliance deadlines begin in 2025.

Republican-led states and industry groups argued the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) overstepped its authority, imposing unrealistic and costly standards. However, the justices declined to block the rule, with Justice Brett Kavanaugh noting compliance measures are not immediately required, and the case may return to the Court. Justice Clarence Thomas dissented, while Justice Samuel Alito recused himself due to a financial conflict.

Environmental advocates view the decision as a temporary victory, citing the rule's projected benefits, including preventing 1.4 billion metric tons of carbon emissions and delivering $370 billion in net climate and health benefits by 2047. Industry groups, however, continue to criticize the rule, warning of economic consequences and increased energy costs. This decision follows other recent Supreme Court rulings upholding methane and mercury emission regulations, though the conservative-majority court has historically limited EPA authority, notably restricting its power to regulate carbon dioxide emissions in 2022. Legal experts expect ongoing challenges to further define the balance between regulatory authority and industry interests.

3. Senators Urge TVA to Reconsider its Draft IRP

Senator Edward Markey (D-Mass.) and TN Congressman Steve Cohen, joined by nine other lawmakers, have urged the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) to reconsider its draft Integrated Resource Plan (IRP), which proposes significant reliance on natural gas for future energy needs. Highlighting concerns about the cost, pollution, and inefficiency of natural gas plants, including those with carbon capture technologies, the lawmakers recommend prioritizing renewable energy, energy efficiency, and distributed energy solutions instead. They argue that such a shift would better address the climate crisis, lower costs for TVA's 10 million customers, and align with national clean energy goals. Advocacy groups like the Sierra Club and the Center for Biological Diversity echoed these concerns, calling for TVA to adopt a forward-thinking plan that reduces pollution, increases resilience to extreme weather, and ensures a transition to 100% renewable energy.

TCWP EVENTS

TCWP's Guidelines for Activities

- We ask that you stay home when you are sick.
- We ask that you know what you're capable of, and that you communicate that to the group leader.
- We recommend that you bring plenty of water and snacks.
- We ask that you not bring pets.

[NOTE: Times listed for all events are Eastern time unless specified otherwise.]

1. Upcoming Events

Whites Creek Workday – Saturday, January 18

TCWP will sponsor a day of trail maintenance work at Whites Creek Small Wild Area in Rhea County at 10 a.m. January 11 as part of our ongoing stewardship activities for this TVA Small Wild Area trail. The trail loops onto land that TCWP purchased from Bowater several years ago, thanks to the generous support of our members.

Participants should wear sturdy shoes or boots and bring work gloves, loppers, and small bow saws or folding saws. Some hand tools will be available at the event. Please be sure to bring clothing appropriate for weather conditions, as well as water, snacks, and/or a lunch.

Participants can meet for carpooling or caravanning in Oak Ridge at the Gold's Gym/Books-A-Million parking lot in Oak Ridge (at the end close to S. Illinois Avenue, near Salsarita's). We'll leave Oak Ridge at 9 a.m., or volunteers can join the crew at the trailhead at 10 a.m.

We plan to spend three or four hours at the site, but volunteers may come and go as they wish. If the weather is uncooperative—excessive rain, or snow and ice—we will reschedule for the following Saturday.

For more information, contact Jimmy Groton at 865-805-9908 or groton87@comcast.net.

Cumberland Trail Alley Ford Workday – Saturday, February 8

On February 8 a day of trail work and hiking will take place on the 2.5-mile section of the Cumberland Trail at the Obed Wild and Scenic River between Nemo Picnic Area and Alley Ford adopted by TCWP in 1998. Participants should dress appropriately for winter weather, wear sturdy shoes or boots, and bring work gloves, loppers, small bow saws or folding saws, shovels and grubbing tools, as well as a lunch and plenty of water. Cumberland Trail State Park personnel will provide some tools that will be available at the event.

Participants can meet for carpooling in Oak Ridge at the Gold's Gym/Books-A-Million parking lot (meet at the end close to S. Illinois Avenue, near Salsarita's) in time to leave Oak Ridge at 9 a.m. Eastern, or can join the crew at Nemo Picnic Area or Rock Creek Campground at 10 a.m. We expect to return to the trailhead by around 3 p.m. (NOTE: If the weather is uncooperative—excessive rain or snow and ice—we will reschedule for the following Saturday.)

Participants will need to sign a National Park Service volunteer form (parent's or guardian's signature required for minors). Forms can be requested in advance from TCWP, or NPS representatives will have forms available at the event.

For additional information, contact Jimmy Groton at 865-805-9908 or at groton87@comcast.net

Spring Cedar Barrens Cleanup/Weed Wrangle® - Saturday, March 1

The Oak Ridge Cedar Barrens will again be the site of exotic invasive plant removal as we conduct our first official Weed Wrangle® of 2024. Located next to Jefferson Middle School in Oak Ridge, the Barrens is a joint project of the City of Oak Ridge, Tennessee Division of Natural Areas, and TCWP. The area is one of just a few cedar barrens in East Tennessee, and provides habitat for three state-listed plants: Torrey's mountain mint, prairie goldenrod, and fewleaf sunflower. It is subject to invasion by bushy lespedeza, leatherleaf viburnum, privet, autumn olive, mimosa, Nepal grass, multiflora rose, and woody plants that threaten the system's prairie plants. Our efforts help to eliminate invasives and other shade-producing plants that prevent the prairie grasses from getting needed sunlight.

Volunteers should meet in the Jefferson Middle School Parking lot at 9 a.m., with sturdy shoes, loppers, gloves, and water. The work session will conclude at noon with a pizza lunch. For more information, contact Jimmy Groton at 865-805-9908 or groton87@comcast.net.

Obed River/Clear Creek Cleanup – Saturday, March 8

On Saturday, March 8, TCWP will work with the National Park Service and the East Tennessee Whitewater Club to host a river-based cleanup within the Obed Wild and Scenic River. The stream section to be paddled will be determined later based on river flow levels and other factors. Experienced whitewater paddlers are welcome to participate, but must provide their own whitewater boat, personal floatation device, helmet, and appropriate river attire. Paddlers should be proficient in Class II/III whitewater.

Participants should meet at the NPS ranger station in Wartburg at 10 a.m. Eastern and should bring sufficient food and water for a full day's river trip. This event may be cancelled or modified based on weather conditions and river levels. For updates, call the Obed River Visitor Center (ranger station) at 423-346-6294. For more information about the event, contact Mark Bevelhimer at 865-679-9242 or at mbevelhimer@gmail.com.

Wildflowers on N. Walker Access to North Ridge Trail – Saturday, March 22

This will be a joint outing for TCWP and the Tennessee Native Plant Society, at an amazing spot for early spring ephemerals. The area is covered in trout lilies, with pockets of twinleaf, foamflowers, wood poppies, and spring beauties. If we hit the timing right, the Dutchman's breeches might be blooming.

We'll meet at the trailhead at 10 a.m. Eastern. There is minimal parking at the trailhead, but there is some street parking along N. Walker Rd and West Outer Dr. There is also ample parking at the nearby Children's Museum of Oak Ridge. The trail is only about .7 miles one way, but is steep in spots. It also can be muddy, and there is a stream crossing. Bring water, a lunch, and bug spray.

Hike leaders will be Margaret Cumberland and Larry Pounds. An email or call to Margaret (meshearin@gmail.com, cell 919-339-0072) saying you are likely to come would be appreciated. This helps with planning and allows for participants to be contacted with any change of plans.

Hike to Four Mile Creek Waterfall, led by Ricky Ryan – Saturday, March 29 Free for TCWP members.
$25 for non-members to join - Limited to 30 participants – Please RSVP

Join us on March 29 for an off-trail hike to Four Mile Creek Waterfall, located within the Obed Wild and Scenic River. Four Mile Creek Waterfall is a 60-foot high overhanging waterfall that drops into a rock amphitheater plunge pool. Depending on recent rainfall and temperatures, it can often be a spectacular sight. Since the approach to the waterfall is totally off-trail, the hike will involve uneven terrain, a few short steep side-hill scrambles, and walking through the forest with no established trail. Four Mile Creek continues downstream from the waterfall to join Clear Creek at Norris Ford.

Participants should meet at the Obed Wild and Scenic River Visitor Center at 9:30 a.m. Eastern. The group will then drive together out to the parking area for the hike. Carpooling would be helpful, due to limited parking. Please wear weather appropriate clothing and bring water and snacks. Sturdy hiking shoes/boots and trekking poles are highly recommended. Participants should expect to spend two hours for this hike.

This hike will be limited to 30 participants. To sign up for this hike, please email nancymanning@tcwp.org

For non-members, join by March 28th here: Join TCWP - Tennessee Citizens for Wilderness Planning

URL: https://tcwp.org/join-tcwp/

2. Recent Events

Fall Cedar Barrens Cleanup/Weed Wrangle® – Saturday, Nov. 2

On November 2, TCWP hosted our third Weed Wrangle® of the year at the Oak Ridge Barrens State Natural Area. At least 21 volunteers worked to remove bushy lespedeza, bush honeysuckle, and other plants from the barrens. We had several new volunteers, including a good mix of young and older people. We took a break to walk with Margaret Cumberland as she led volunteers on a short walk through the barrens to introduce them to the unique habitat and to identify plants.

We were able to see three rare plants—white prairie goldenrod (State Endangered), Torrey's mountain mint (State Special Concern Species), and naked-stem sunflower (State Special Concern Species,) along with several other barrens plants. We were lucky to find several of the prairie goldenrods still in flower and doing well. Water bars on the trail near the triangle appear to be keeping erosion under control on the trail to the entrance. After the morning's work and wildflower walk, we had a nice lunch together by one of the Clinch River Environmental Studies Organization's (CRESO) wetlands. *Jimmy Groton*

TCWP Annual Meeting - Saturday, Nov. 9

TCWP's 2024 Annual Meeting was held November 9 at Cumberland Mountain State Park, with 30 people in attendance. Board President Mark Bevelhimer gave a summary of the year's activities. In the absence of Treasurer Joel Freund, who was unable to attend, he also reported on the organization's financial condition. Executive Director Nancy Manning presented the First Annual Founder's to Jean Bangham, a founding member and the organization's first treasurer.

Nominating Committee member Chuck Estes presented the slate of nominated board members for 2025, as published in the September 2024 TCWP newsletter. A motion to approve the full slate was made by Bob Richards and seconded by Roger Macklin. All present voted in favor. A motion to approve the slate of the 2025 Nominating Committee, as published in the September 2024 TCWP newsletter, was made by Carol Grametbauer and seconded by Jerry Thornton. All present voted in favor.

Following the business meeting, attendees heard a presentation by keynote speaker Mark Thurman, Director of Conservation Collaboration for the Tennessee Nature Conservancy. The group then adjourned to lunch, which was followed by hikes led by Jimmy Groton, Margaret Cumberland, and Larry Pounds. *Carol Grametbauer*

North Ridge Trail Invasive Species Removal - Saturday, November 16

The N. Walker access to the North Ridge Trail in Oak Ridge is one of the best early spring wildflower spots in town, but it's been slowly getting covered by invasive species over the past few years. On November 16, 20 volunteers came together to remove as many invasives as possible. It was an excellent morning, with 15 bags full of Japanese honeysuckle and English ivy collected. Chinese privet shrubs the size of small trees were cut down and propped up so they won't re-sprout. We had so many people, we started at both ends of the access trail and met in the middle. Join us on a wildflower hike at this location in March!
(See Upcoming Events) *Margaret Cumberland*

Social Field Safety with Field Inclusive – Thursday, November 19

In a Zoom program cosponsored by TCWP and the UT Arboretum Society , attendees heard from Field Inclusive co-founder Lauren D. Pharr. Field Inclusive is a nonprofit dedicated to making outdoor fieldwork and outdoor experiences safer for all –particularly marginalized and historically excluded individuals who work professionally and/or conduct research professionally in the outdoors. Pharr discussed "social field safety," and why certain precautions and safety measures need to be taken in the field so that all can enjoy the outdoors.

Field Inclusive strives to provide tangible improvements in the natural sciences by addressing social field safety issues related to equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. Their goal is to support all field biologists, as well as those working and recreating in the outdoors, by identifying and addressing social field safety issues, developing resources, and supporting marginalized and historically excluded researchers through financial aid and experiential learning opportunities.

Holiday Party/New Member Event - Thursday, December 12

About 35 current and new TCWP members and their guests gathered at the First Presbyterian Church in Oak Ridge to enjoy appetizers, desserts, and beverages at our annual holiday party. Board President Mark Bevelhimer welcomed partygoers, and Executive Director Nancy Manning recognized two student winners of TCWP's recent logo contest: Jenna Meadors, Jefferson Middle School; and Kayla Carter, Oak Ridge High School. Jenna and Kayla were awarded checks for their winning designs.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

- January 18 – Whites Creek Workday
- February 8 – Cumberland Trail Alley Ford Workday
- March 1 – Spring Cedar Barren Cleanup/Weed Wrangle®
- March 8 – Obed River/Clear Creek Cleanup
- March 22 – Wildflowers on N. Walker Access to North Ridge Trail
- March 29 – Hike to Four Mile Creek Waterfall

These events are subject to cancellation.
Call ahead to verify the event will occur.

Tennessee Citizens of Wilderness Planning (TCWP)

The mission of TCWP is to: Preserve wild places and waters through protection, advocacy, stewardship, and education.

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