

2025

# Impact REPORT



The Nature  
Conservancy  
Kentucky





## Lessons From 50 Years

2025 is a special year for The Nature Conservancy in Kentucky. Fifty years ago, a small but dedicated group of volunteers founded our Kentucky chapter, bringing to the Bluegrass State an increasingly successful model for conservation—a science-based, nonpartisan, collaborative approach focused on delivering tangible, lasting results. Five decades later, The Nature Conservancy is thriving in Kentucky, across the United States and in more than 80 countries around the world. We are immensely proud to be part of this organization, and we are immensely grateful to the staff, trustees, supporters, partners and community leaders who have contributed so much to our success.

One of the things you learn working at The Nature Conservancy or serving on our board is that the mission and the organization are much bigger than any one of us. Thousands were part of the journey before we joined, and many thousands more will come after we have passed on.

TNC's sustained and growing impact depends on staying nimble and adapting in a rapidly changing world and staying true to our values and collaborative approach. No single reason accounts for our success, but striking that balance between adaptability and core consistency comes as close as any.

Fifty years in and looking confidently—despite so many headwinds—into the future, we offer three additional reasons for our success in Kentucky.

One, we recognize that TNC gets a lot more done when we work together as an integrated organization.

What we do in Kentucky matters to the world, and what happens in the world matters to Kentucky.

Two, we embrace partnership. Every significant success we have achieved has involved partners. Kentucky is not always an easy place for conservation, and we must work even more closely with partners in the coming years.

Three, we set (and achieve!) ambitious goals while remaining grounded in people and place. One of our great strengths is that we deliver results you can walk around on. We all need to push for bigger results globally, but we cannot forget that many of our fiercest advocates fell in love with nature in their backyard woods.

As we celebrate 50 years, we know we are in a critical decade for the planet. The investments, policies and decisions we make today will determine our trajectory far into the future. And we do have a choice. A future with a livable climate, healthy communities and thriving nature is still possible.

The Nature Conservancy, in Kentucky and around the world, has the ambition and vision, coupled with the strategies and hard work, to deliver just such a future.

Thank you for your continued investment in our work and mission. Here's to the next 50 years!

**David Phemister**, Kentucky State Director  
**Gordon Dabney**, Kentucky Board of Trustees Chair

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Watch an inspiring video  
about 50 years of Kentucky  
conservation! Filming by  
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## New Land Acquisition Expands Protected Corridor in the Appalachian Mountains

Step onto a hiking trail, cast for brook trout in a clear stream or awake to morning fog blanketing the valleys, and you will understand why The Nature Conservancy is so focused on protecting the Appalachian Mountains. They are both breathtakingly beautiful and incredibly important for people and nature. While so valuable, much of the region remains unprotected. But the Kentucky program recently added an important piece to this conservation puzzle.

Mountain River Farms, a 1,075-acre parcel in Whitley County, lies near other protected lands. TNC acquired the property for its own conservation significance and its important location within a prioritized conservation corridor through the Appalachians—one of the most diverse, connected and resilient landscapes in the

world. TNC is working with partners to protect a corridor throughout the Appalachians' 2,000-mile expanse from Alabama to Canada to help wildlife adapt to climate change and open new opportunities for public recreation and economic benefits.

**Protecting a property with high conservation value**  
Mountain River Farms lies within TNC's Pine to Cumberland Mountain focus area, a critical stronghold that we value for its natural diversity, resiliency and forest connectivity. The property also contains 6.2 stream miles, including the headwaters of Buffalo Creek.

"Buffalo Creek is classified as a high-quality stream and designated as 'special use waters,' a statewide

classification based on environmental importance," says Chris Garland, Appalachians program director for Kentucky. "We've seen an abundance of deer, turkey and woodcock, along with elk and bear sign, so this property boasts diverse and abundant wildlife."

One of the reasons Mountain River Farms stood out for TNC was its proximity to other protected lands, including the Cumberland Forest Project. This innovative collaboration across 253,000 acres—100,000 acres in Kentucky and Tennessee—brings together impact investment, sustainable forestry and permanent public recreation easements. Nearby nature preserves and wildlife management areas add to this growing network of protected lands.

"Any time we can build on protection and expand connectivity, that promotes wildlife movement and resilient habitats," Garland says. "Larger and more connected habitat management efforts also provide larger benefits to the public, as they have more opportunities for outdoor recreation and connecting with nature."

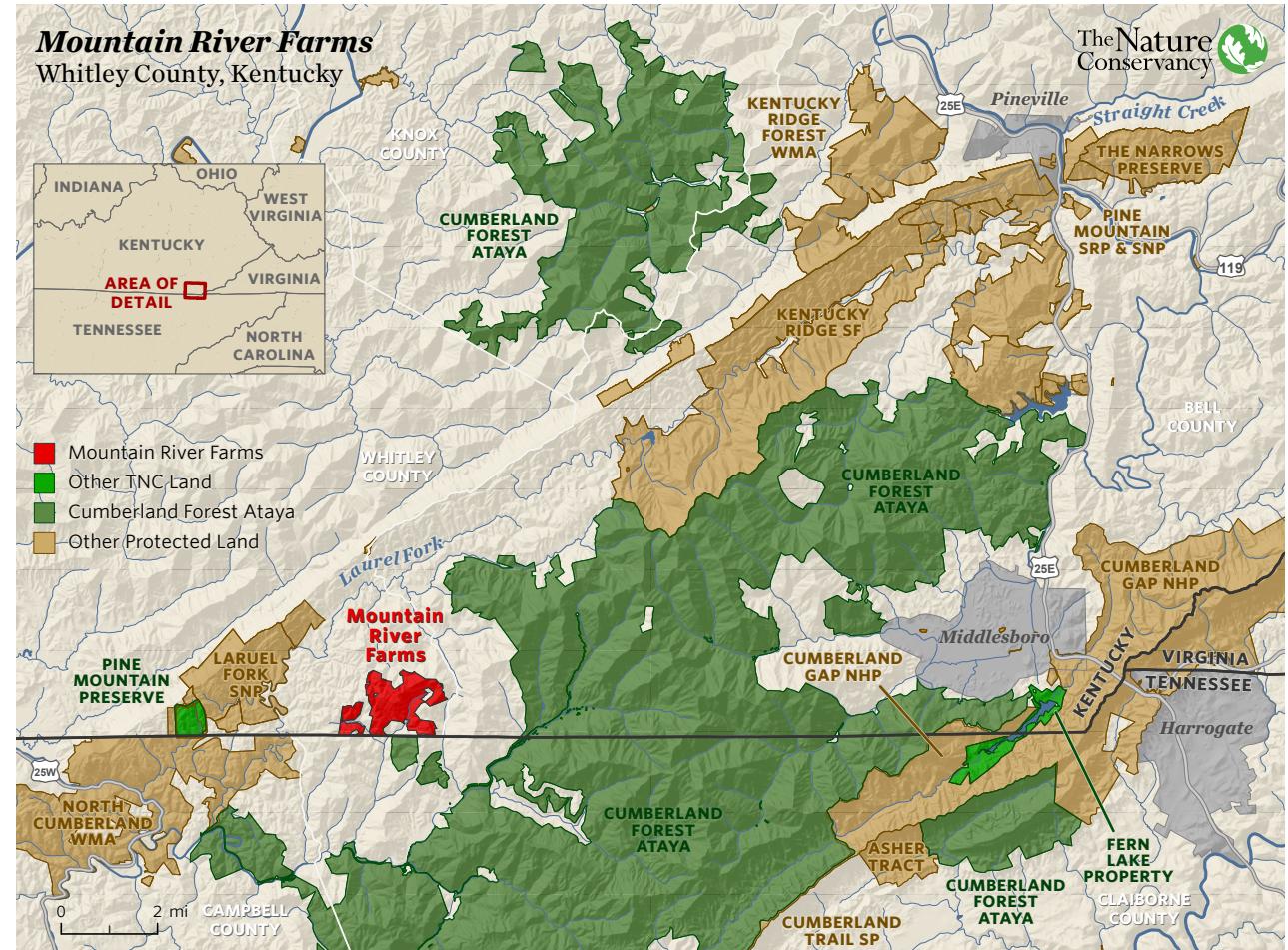
### A future in public hands

The Nature Conservancy aims to transfer this property to a longtime partner, the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, to ensure public access and ongoing wildlife and habitat management, as well as provide public recreation and associated economic opportunities in an area that needs investment. According to Ben Robinson, the department's wildlife division director, public land in eastern Kentucky is a top priority for his team.

"It allows us access to better manage our elk herd," Robinson says. "This area is not currently open to the public for hunting or wildlife watching, but in the future, Kentuckians and visitors will be able to enjoy those opportunities. And by acquiring Mountain River Farms, we're getting close to connecting to the much larger Cumberland Forest Wildlife Management Area—that benefits all of us."

As with many places in Kentucky's Appalachian Mountains, some areas on Mountain River Farms have been mined and reclamation is still underway. Garland notes that the recent timing of reclamation activities provides Kentucky Fish and Wildlife with more options to manage the area for different habitat types. Robinson says future habitat management will likely include controlled burning and invasive species removal.

Acquiring and then transferring Mountain River Farms to Kentucky Fish and Wildlife advances the Kentucky program's current goals of protecting 92,000 acres (we are at 56,275 and counting) and transferring at least 10,000 acres into public ownership for



sustainable, place-based economic opportunity. As the Appalachian coal industry has declined, outdoor recreation has emerged as an important component of the region's economic diversification.

"This will be good for the communities both in Kentucky and Tennessee," Garland says. "This land has never been open to the public. Once it's open, it will be open forever."

For Robinson, the upcoming transfer of Mountain River Farms is another step in a longstanding,

beneficial partnership with TNC.

"We're really excited about this property, and most of all the continued partnership," Robinson says. "Together we have already protected tens of thousands of acres, creating the kinds of opportunities for present and future generations that would not have been possible alone. We look forward to many more accomplishments with TNC in the future."

# Conservation Highlights



## ↑ Reforesting Former Mine Lands

On April 10, Suntory Global Spirits joined The Nature Conservancy, Green Forests Work and the University of Kentucky for a fourth annual tree planting event on former mine lands in the Appalachian Mountains of eastern Kentucky. Seventy volunteers from Suntory and 10 UK students withstood a cold and rainy day in Knott County to plant 7,000 trees on 10 acres of a former surface mine.

"It was misty, raining and muddy, but conditions didn't seem to bother any of the volunteers," says Chris Garland, Appalachians program director for the Kentucky program. "Everybody had a great time and did a good job. It's always impressive to see volunteers at work. They don't slow down; they get really motivated to get the job done."

Professional tree planters added to the volunteers' efforts, with a total of 86,000 trees going into the

ground across 122 acres. The seedlings included a diverse mix of native trees and shrubs, including white oak, Northern red oak, chestnut oak, black cherry, persimmon and 13 other native species, along with 600 pounds of native grass and wildflower seeds spread across the project area.

"This work reduces forest fragmentation, improves water quality in the Middle Fork of the Kentucky River and restores upland oak-shortleaf pine habitat," says Michael French, director of operations for Green Forests Work.

Funding for this project was provided by Green Forests Work, TNC, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Suntory Global Spirits, the Arbor Day Foundation, the Sheldon and Audrey Katz Foundation, and other partners.

## ↓ Solar Installations on the Way for Cumberland Forest Project in Kentucky

The first agreements have been signed for future solar installations on the Cumberland Forest Project in Kentucky. Planned by the energy company ENGIE, the installations are projected to total 42 acres and will generate between 5.1 and 8.4 megawatts of clean power. All three sites are located on former mine lands in Bell County. The project could take up to five years to complete, and once the installations are built, ENGIE will contribute funding toward the Cumberland Forest Community Fund annually for five years.



LEFT TO RIGHT: © Green Forests Work, © Ciril Jazbec



### ↑ Cumberland Forest Bioblitz

In spring 2025, The Nature Conservancy, the Office of Kentucky Nature Preserves, the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, and other conservation partners conducted a “bioblitz” on the Cumberland Forest Project to better understand salamander numbers and diversity on the property. The partners caught, photographed and documented an abundance of salamanders, focusing on species of concern and threatened and endangered species, such as the yellow spotted salamander. The information gained will inform management practices now and in the future.

### ↓ Starfire Solar Installation Wins Siting Board Approval

The BrightNight Starfire Renewable Energy Center, a 7,000-acre solar installation planned in eastern Kentucky, took a significant step toward becoming a reality. In August, the Kentucky Public Service Commission’s Electric Generation and Transmission Siting Board approved the installation’s siting on the former Starfire mine in Breathitt, Perry and Knott counties. This decision opens the way for construction to begin on the first phase of the project, a 210-megawatt solar facility. If all phases of the project are completed, it will generate a total of 800 megawatts, making it one of the largest solar installations on a former mine in the country.





### ↑ Third Community Solar Project for Eastern Kentucky

The Nature Conservancy and the Mountain Association recently installed our third community solar project in eastern Kentucky, this one on Knox County's Economic Opportunities Center's Emergency Support Center. This solar installation will lower greenhouse gas emissions while saving the organization approximately \$10,000 a year on energy costs.

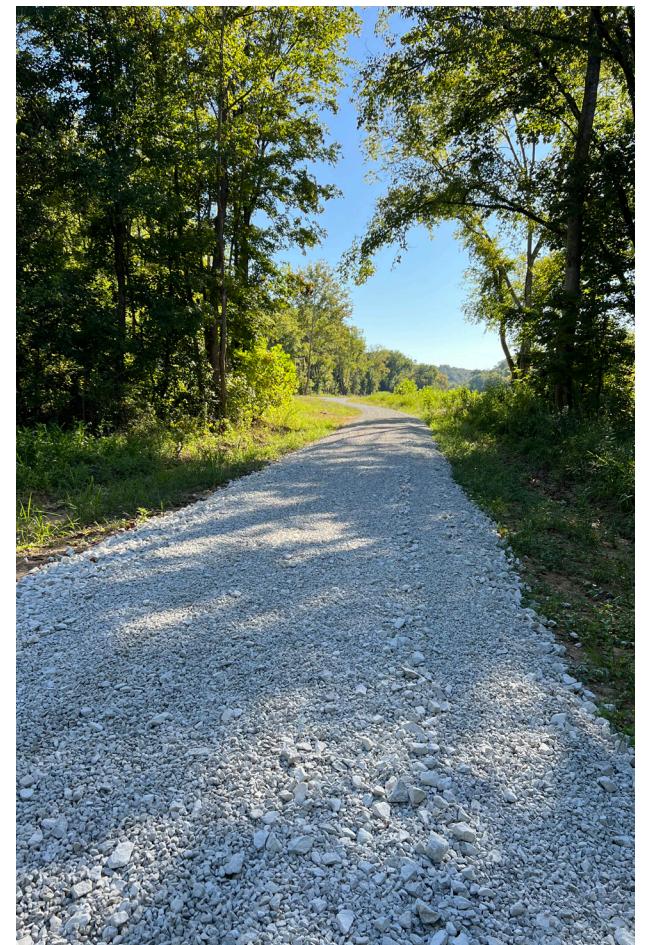
Founded in 1964 during the national War on Poverty, the center uses the building to house adults and families experiencing homelessness and boasts a 90 percent success rate securing more permanent housing options. The agency also provides many other services to people in the region, including weatherization of homes, Head Start and senior services, and education and training programs.

"Knox County EOC provides many benefits to local communities in its region," says Heather Jeffs, director of external affairs for TNC in Kentucky. "These are essential services for Kentuckians in the area, and any money the organization can save on its utility bills is more that they can invest in vital programming."

Solar installation funding was provided by the Cumberland Forest Community Fund, Mountain Association, Solar Finance Fund, and Elective Pay, a federal incentive. Everybody Solar donated some of the solar panels used in the project.

### ↓ Improving Access to the Green River

With Green River Lock and Dam #5 now removed, The Nature Conservancy and our partners have turned our attention to enhancing public access to the river. Road improvements, parking and signage will enable visitors to safely reach the newly free-flowing river for outdoor recreation when the area opens to the public—hopefully in 2026!





## Voters Support More Funding for Conservation

The Nature Conservancy and our partners continue to make the case for Kentucky to increase its investments in conservation. Several professional reports informed the economic case we presented during numerous meetings with legislators to build momentum for action. The process also includes hearing from voters.

TNC also commissioned a recent poll which showed that more than 75 percent of Kentucky voters—including strong majorities of Democrats, Republicans and Independents—believe funding for conservation programs should be increased. Moreover, 85 percent of Kentuckians supported dedicating additional funding for land, water and wildlife conservation—a significant increase from virtually identical polling we conducted in 2011.

“Polling shows that people want investments in conservation even when state funding is tight,” says Heather Jeffs, TNC’s director of external affairs for Kentucky. “They value nature and know these investments provide jobs and recreation opportunities here at home.”

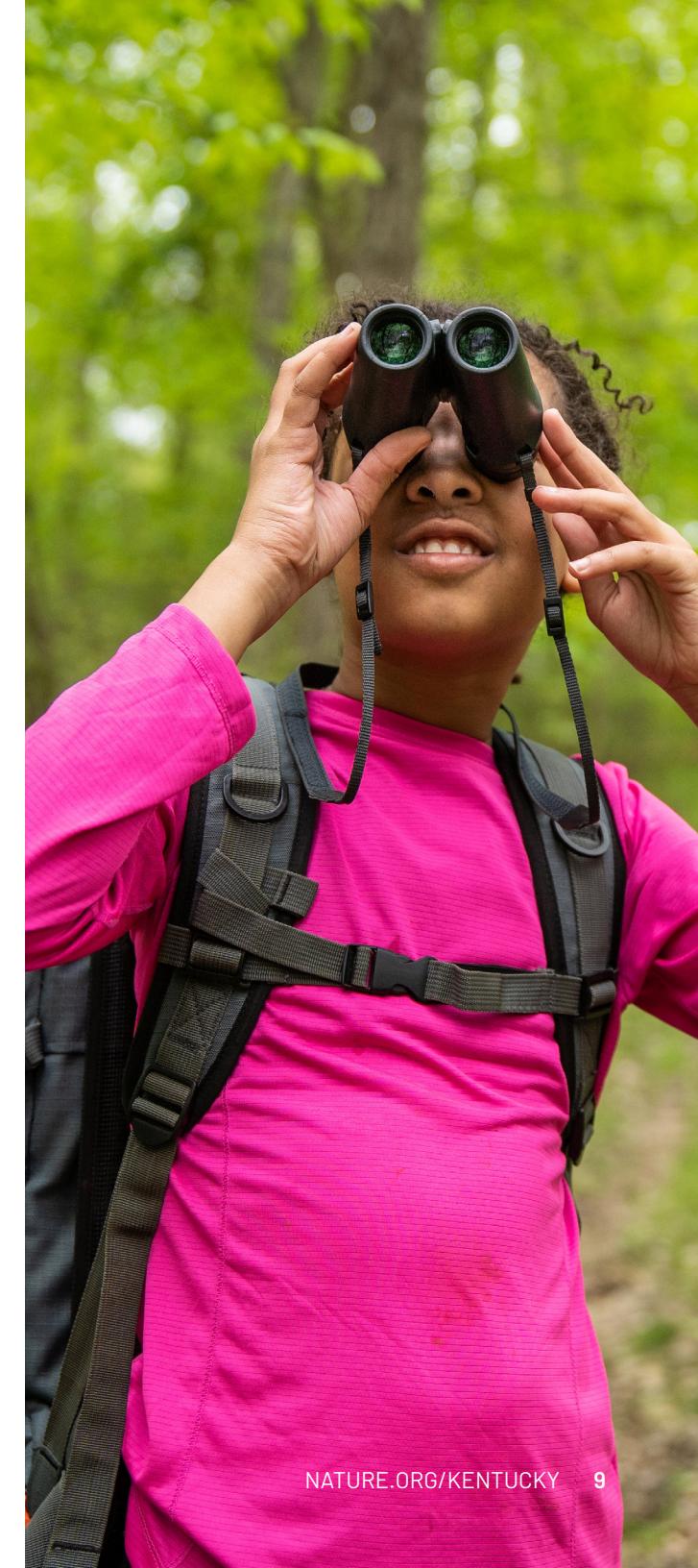
## ← Take the Ultimate Appalachians Road Trip

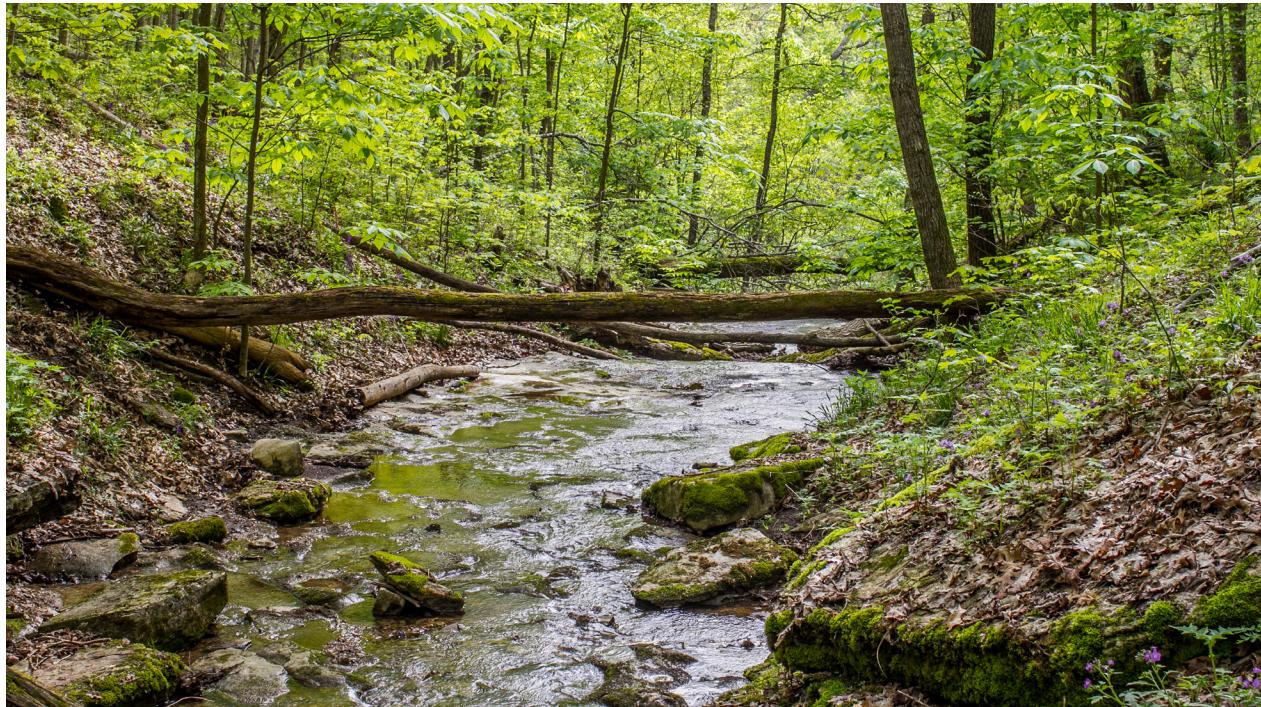
The Appalachian Mountains are among the most biodiverse, connected and climate-resilient landscapes on Earth. Explore the entire 2,000-mile mountain range with The Nature Conservancy’s Appalachians Road Trip online feature. You’ll learn interesting facts from every state in the mountain range. There’s even a playlist you can listen to! Scan the QR code to begin your adventure.



## ↑ Green Heart Louisville Project featured in *Nature Conservancy Magazine*

*Nature Conservancy* magazine recently featured Kentucky’s Green Heart Louisville Project, a first-of-its-kind intervention and study that tested the scientific theory that increased greening can improve human health. Scan the QR code to read the early results of this groundbreaking scientific study!





## Bringing Streams Back to Life

A freshwater revitalization is underway on a 348-acre property in Scott County. The Nature Conservancy and restoration professionals are returning more natural conditions to streams that were straightened and rerouted generations ago. These streams lie within the Eagle Creek watershed, which boasts significant populations of mussels but struggles with excess sedimentation. Restoring the streams will lessen sedimentation going into Eagle Creek, enhancing habitat and water quality for mussels and other aquatic life.

"It was a pretty standard agricultural process in the early to mid-1900s to straighten a stream and move it to the side of a field so you had more room for

agriculture," says Richard Clausen, mitigation program manager for TNC in Kentucky. "This property is no longer used for agriculture, so this was a chance to bring back a meandering stream."

Re-creating these natural curves and reconnecting the streams to their floodplain will reduce scour and bank erosion, which can be particularly damaging during floods.

"When this stream floods in the future, much of its energy will spread out onto its floodplain instead of scouring its banks," Clausen says. "That reduces erosion and deposits of sediment downstream, giving mussels the cleaner water they need."

Mussels are an important indicator species. Healthy, thriving populations indicate clean water and habitat suitable not only for mussels but also for many other aquatic animals.

The Nature Conservancy partnered with Resource Environmental Solutions (RES) to perform the work, which includes restoring 15,044 linear feet of stream. Bringing back the meandering pattern to the straightened streams was an important step to improve water quality. So was planting trees.

"In addition to channel work, we're also planting about 6,000 trees, which will eventually establish a riparian corridor along the streams," says Kiersten Fuchs, senior project manager with RES. "That will provide habitat for macroinvertebrates such as dragonflies, mayflies, water striders and crayfish. Trees also provide shade and lower water temperatures. And increasing water quality on this site provides benefits downstream, too."

RES will also remove invasive species at the site, such as bush honeysuckle, multiflora rose and lespedeza. Finally, they will perform "live staking" along the streams, implanting roots into the bank to increase stability.

Funding for projects like this restoration is provided through federal and state stream mitigation programs. To compensate for impacts to rivers and streams elsewhere, improvements are made to other waterways—often in areas of greater conservation value where nature will benefit most from restoration.

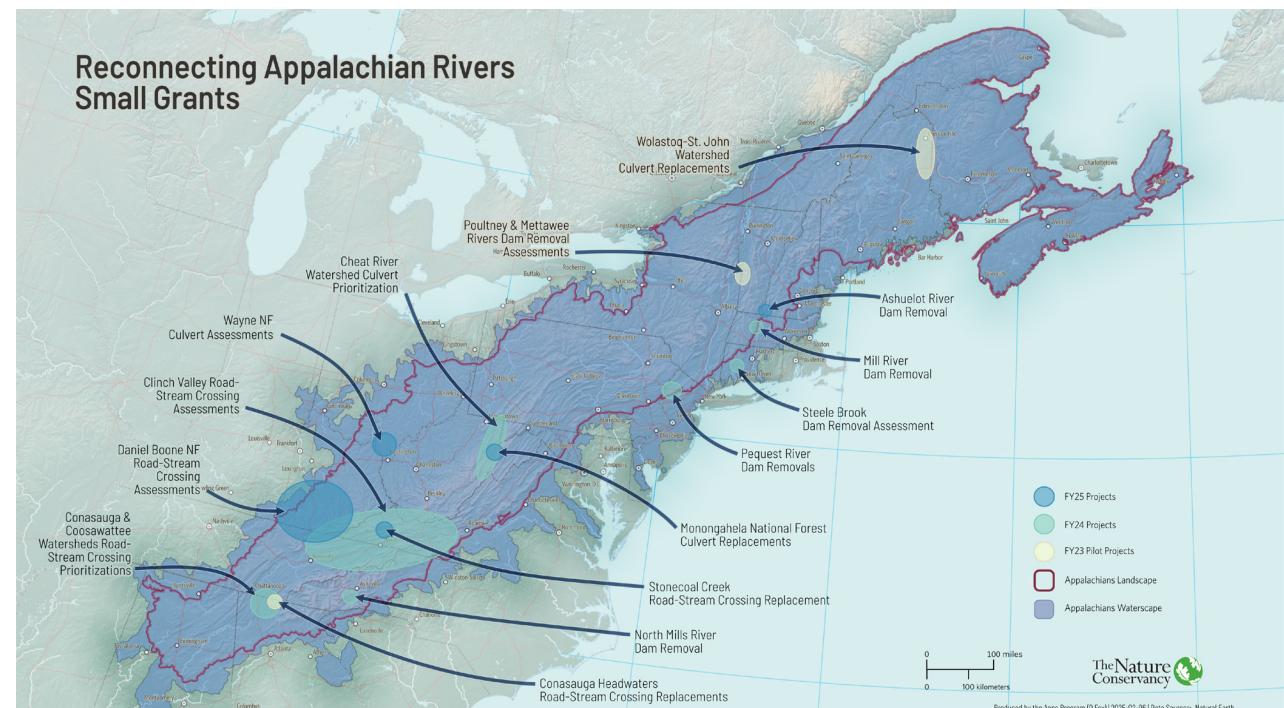
"The state is divided into 10 regions for mitigation, and this site is in the area that services Louisville and Northern Kentucky," Clausen says. "This region is experiencing extensive development with large impacts to streams, making it extremely important to provide high-quality restoration projects for lost aquatic habitat. We're excited about accomplishing more restoration projects like this in the future."

# Reconnecting Waterways in the Daniel Boone National Forest

The Appalachian Mountains are a global priority for The Nature Conservancy, and Kentucky's Daniel Boone National Forest is set to benefit from the organization's focus on these mountains. A new internal TNC grant is enabling the Kentucky program to assess barriers in the national forest's streams, specifically culverted stream crossings that prevent fish passage and contribute to road flooding. As part of the assessment, TNC and our partners at the Office of Kentucky Nature Preserves (OKNP) will determine which culverts are causing the greatest impacts to nature and communities. The results will provide a road map for future restoration.

"Whenever you have barriers in a stream or river, they create separate segments where aquatic species cannot interact with one another. It's important for biodiversity that streams and rivers be connected along their length," says Shelly Morris, director of freshwater conservation for the Kentucky program. "There's also the issue of flood resiliency. As we see more extreme precipitation events, culvert blowouts increasingly prevent or delay people from getting to safety or receiving help after storms."

TNC's Reconnecting Appalachian Rivers grant is supporting the Kentucky program and OKNP as we prioritize the best places to install better culverts on road-stream crossings in the Daniel Boone. Culverts are still necessary, but new designs or locations can benefit streams, rivers and people. In addition to enhancing flood resiliency, better designs can reconnect streams and rivers and help protect fish species, such as the threatened blackside dace and the Cumberland arrow darter.



Sara Gottlieb, TNC's Southern Appalachian freshwater director, says the Daniel Boone National Forest was a good candidate for the grant because the region is known for its biodiversity and is also an area that needs investment.

"The freshwater biodiversity in the Appalachians is globally significant—this is where we want to work to have the biggest impact," Gottlieb says.

Claudia Cotton, forest soil scientist for the U.S. Forest Service, says the agency is grateful for this partnership. "This project is laying the foundation to reduce stream sedimentation and improve the watershed," she says. "We couldn't do it without The Nature Conservancy."

Since its beginning in 2023, the Reconnecting Appalachian Rivers grant program has awarded \$540,500 to 15 projects in 12 states and leveraged more than \$4.4M of public funding. Funding supports the early stages of connectivity work—such as the culvert assessment TNC is conducting with OKNP—to build a pipeline of "shovel-ready" projects for the future.

# Agriculture



## Pouring a More Sustainable Bourbon

Bourbon remains a significant part of Kentucky's heritage and economy. Bourbon distilleries with ambitious sustainability goals are now exploring how they can not only produce a quality product, but also support conservation and climate efforts in the Bluegrass State.

Seeking to build a bourbon legacy that makes future generations proud, one major distillery has approached The Nature Conservancy for help. The result is a detailed analysis and accompanying white paper that explores key barriers and opportunities for increasing the sustainability of Kentucky corn used in bourbon production. The paper offers recommendations that can bring the industry closer to its sustainability goals by partnering with the farmers who supply its grain.

"Corn is a big component of the bourbon industry's greenhouse gas footprint," says Zach Luttrell, TNC's director of agriculture for Kentucky and Tennessee. "The steps these companies can take to reduce that footprint are the same steps that help keep our soil in place."

TNC worked with universities, industry associations, and large and small distillers, conducting more than two dozen interviews while also analyzing the literature from past studies.

"It was important to get all the existing information into one place," says Luttrell. "The extent of meta-analysis we did, combined with interviews and expertise around decarbonization and addressing barriers to regenerative agriculture, hasn't been available to the bourbon industry in this way."

Bourbon is a global spirit, but the corn that goes into it is sourced from a small geography—mostly around Elizabethtown, Lexington and Louisville. Companies use the same farmers to source their corn—and this presents an opportunity.

"This white paper really makes the case for companies to work in sync with one another," Luttrell says. "The challenge is too big for any one company to take on. But if the industry collaborates, that will yield much greater efficiencies toward shared solutions."

Collaboration may come in the form of novel incentives and support systems that help farmers plant cover crops, which keep living roots in the ground year-round, helping to prevent erosion and capturing carbon in the soil. This practice costs farmers money and time during the busy harvest season. But with farmers and the industry working together to pilot and scale new solutions to these kinds of barriers, bourbon can be the catalyst for unique win-win opportunities.

Some important steps are already in motion within the industry. For Luttrell, the most important thing is to build momentum.

"Our TNC Kentucky team proves that local action drives global change," adds Gabriella Scolio, agriculture decarbonization specialist for TNC. "By working hand-in-hand with the bourbon industry, we're not only delivering conservation impact at home but also shaping how TNC engages with companies worldwide."



# Opportunities at the Edge of Agricultural Fields

When most Kentuckians think of farming, they envision rows of corn and soybeans. What happens at the edges of these crop fields, however, can be important for conservation. It is a common practice for farmers to plant crops all the way up to the edges of their fields. However, leaving space around those edges for a buffer—an area that separates a crop field from a stream or wetland with plantings of perennial grasses or pollinator species—can provide significant benefits, including clean water and wildlife habitat.

"Edge of field is a priority for us in Kentucky and Tennessee," says Zach Luttrell, director of agriculture for The Nature Conservancy in both states. "But there are challenges to these practices that are unique, even more so than in-field practices—particularly cost."

Convincing farmers and landowners to allow small parts of their fields to be used as buffers rather than crops can be difficult. TNC recently worked with the University of Kentucky to conduct focus groups with farmers and landowners to better understand the challenges of increasing adoption of edge-of-field buffers.

Dr. Amanda Gumbert, extension specialist for water quality at UK, led the focus groups. Dr. Gumbert says buffers filter runoff, protect stream banks from erosion and add carbon to the soil. Conducting the focus groups revealed important reasons why farmers and landowners hesitate to install them. One important complicating issue is that approximately two-thirds of cropland is rented, rather than owned, by the farmer.

"I heard a fear of lost income, especially on rented land," Gumbert says. "There is a perception on the part of the farmer that the landowner wants to maximize profits, which they perceive to be farming from fence to fence. There is also the challenge of transitioning to a different approach to farming—they may not have the equipment or the time."

What surprised Luttrell and Gumbert, however, was that these perceptions by farmers and landowners often resulted from miscommunication. They heard farmers say they were afraid of losing their land rental contract if they pulled some of the land out of

production for buffers rather than maximizing rental payments. However, during the landowner focus groups, they heard frustration from landowners that farmers weren't implementing more buffers.

"We really just need to have a conversation here," Gumbert says. "There is potential that farmers and landowners can come together and find mutual benefits from incorporating buffers."

In addition to conducting the focus groups with UK, Luttrell is also dedicating a portion of his time to TNC's North America Agriculture program. That team is working to determine next steps for accelerating edge of field practices across the United States.

"Our Kentucky focus groups give me a running start on my work at the North American level," Luttrell says. "Ultimately, understanding the barriers is fundamental to developing solutions anywhere we work."



# Kentucky Celebrates 50 Years of Conservation

The Nature Conservancy in Kentucky turned 50 in 2025, and we celebrated this historic milestone on a perfect late summer evening at Ashbourne Farms in LaGrange. More than 220 donors, partners, board members, staff and family joined us for a wonderful night honoring half a century of conservation accomplishments. Attendees enjoyed locally sourced cuisine, great music by The Local Honey's and grateful remarks from several speakers. Stuart Brown, a TNC global board member, and Nature Conservancy CEO Jennifer Morris also attended the celebration, along with many community leaders and longtime supporters.

"This night and our entire 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary are an opportunity to celebrate, look forward, and thank the trustees, donors, partners and community leaders instrumental to our success," says David Phemister,

Kentucky state director. "More than anything, I am grateful."

The Kentucky chapter began in 1975 and has since protected more than 155,000 acres of land, reconnected 200 free-flowing miles of the Green River and restored nearly 20,000 acres of floodplain wetlands. We have planted tens of thousands of trees to reforest former mine lands in eastern Kentucky, secured the largest conservation easement in state history and played a key role in the groundbreaking Green Heart Louisville Project.

"I am so impressed with what this program has accomplished and how it does its work," says Brown, who grew up in Kentucky. "My wife, Joanna, and I are proud to be supporters."

Beyond any single conservation project, however, the Kentucky program has exemplified commitment, innovation and partnership throughout its first 50 years. This combination has brought many groups together with the shared goal of conserving Kentucky's breathtaking natural resources for future generations.

"From its first protection project at Boone County Cliffs to Cumberland Forest, The Nature Conservancy in Kentucky has delivered real results and shown a deep commitment to nature and people," says Morris. "I am grateful to this program's supporters and partners, I am honored to help celebrate 50 years, and I see a bright future for TNC in Kentucky. Congratulations."



## Thank you for 2025 – AND FOR 50 YEARS!

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our generous donors, friends and board members—both past and present. Your unwavering support is the foundation of our success and the driving force behind 50 years of conservation in Kentucky. Every acre protected and every river mile restored are a testament to your commitment and generosity.

We are proud of our achievements over the past five decades, as they are truly inspiring. We are also so grateful for the friendships we have made, the conversations and laughter we have shared, and the encouragement each of you has given our work and our mission.

As we celebrate 50 years, we are also filled with optimism for a future where nature and people thrive. Thanks for your continued support and for standing with us in this essential work.

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