

INVESTING IN OUR SHARED FUTURE

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# RUSSELL FORK RIVER ACCESS DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

PREPARED FOR

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*The Nature Conservancy &  
Appalachian Regional Commission*

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This strategy was developed with the generous support of the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and in partnership with The Nature Conservancy. Planning and technical services were provided by SE Group and Equinox Environmental.

## Partners at the Table

The following organizations contributed knowledge, guidance, and commitment to this effort across working group and steering committee participation:

- ◆ Breaks Interstate Park
- ◆ Big Sandy Development District
- ◆ Cumberland Plateau PDC
- ◆ Dickenson County
- ◆ Dickenson County IDA
- ◆ Friends of Southwest Virginia
- ◆ Heart of Appalachia
- ◆ Kentucky Dept. of Fish & Wildlife Resources
- ◆ Kentucky Fish & Wildlife
- ◆ Pike County Tourism
- ◆ The Nature Conservancy
- ◆ Thompson Charitable Foundation
- ◆ Town of Haysi
- ◆ City of Elkhorn City
- ◆ U.S. Forest Service
- ◆ Virginia Dept. of Wildlife Resources

## Project Team

This plan was developed and prepared by SE Group in collaboration with Equinox Environmental.



Cover Photo Credit: Ronnie Hylton



### MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

Our vision is a world where the diversity of life thrives, and people act to conserve nature for its own sake and its ability to fulfill our needs and enrich our lives.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Russell Fork River is a 50+ mile tributary of the Big Sandy River, cutting a scenic path north from Dickenson County, VA, and into Pike County, KY. The Russell Fork flows through Breaks Interstate Park, managed jointly by the states of Virginia and Kentucky, where it winds through one of the deepest gorges east of the Mississippi.

The Russell Fork, with its combination of tranquil and lively flows, is well-known in Central Appalachia for its awe-inspiring beauty, history, and the wide variety of recreational activities that the river has to offer. The river is popular with anglers and offers high-quality recreational fishing opportunities. Breaks Canyon features Class V+ whitewater that attracts paddlers from around the world, particularly during whitewater releases on weekends in October. While there are world-class rapids available for highly skilled paddlers, there are also many sections of the Russell Fork River that are more tame and could be enjoyed by paddlers of various skill levels.

By identifying opportunities to enhance public access points, the Russell Fork Scenic Blueway project seeks to create a safe, connected, and well-organized river trail system that improves access to one of Central Appalachia's most dramatic and biodiverse river corridors. By enhancing public access points along the Russell Fork River, this project supports rural communities in Virginia and Kentucky and creates a full spectrum of river opportunities for visitors and residents alike.



## THE NEED

The area around the Russell Fork River has faced economic challenges, population decline, and high poverty rates in recent years. Dickenson and Pike Counties are both classified as “Distressed” by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). This designation places the counties in the bottom 10% of counties nationally based on poverty rates, per capita income, and unemployment over time.

However, the Russell Fork and surrounding area also offer a rich network of outdoor recreation opportunities. The Russell Fork River has been a local recreation destination for paddlers, anglers, and swimmers for decades, and Breaks Interstate Park leads the region in scale and consistency of visitation. However, the current official public access points in the stretch between Haysi, VA, and Elkhorn City, KY, are relatively few and far between. For many recreational paddlers, the distance between many of these public access locations can make a paddling trip longer than desirable, and access points that exist often lack sufficient signage and infrastructure. Current access points are typically not very developed, which can lead to high maintenance needs and costs, particularly after significant weather events. In addition, parking at access points is often limited or poorly defined, making it difficult for visitors to find suitable spots to park. Current access points also have limited cell phone service, which can be problematic for first-time visitors to the area or people trying to contact emergency services. Additional parking areas and improvements to public access locations are needed to make the Russell Fork River safer and more accessible and would open the river up to a greater number of users.

## THE OPPORTUNITY

The Cumberland-Pine Mountain Corridor Recreation Plan highlights the Russell Fork Blueway as a key opportunity to strengthen cross-state partnerships and build a more connected and resilient outdoor recreation economy that benefits both people and the landscape. The Russell Fork Blueway project helps combat systemic economic distress from Haysi to Elkhorn City, using targeted investments to improve strong recreational opportunities. Improvements and additional access points would increase connectivity, enhance safety, and foster interstate coordination between Virginia and Kentucky. This project offers an opportunity to enhance existing opportunities, provide accessibility, and boost economic activity along the entire river corridor.

# CONTEXT

## THE CUMBERLAND-PINE MOUNTAIN CONTEXT

The Russell Fork River Blueway does not exist in isolation. It is one of nine investment-ready projects identified through the Cumberland–Pine Mountain Corridor Outdoor Recreation Plan – the first tri-state outdoor recreation strategy ever developed for Southwest Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, and Northeast Tennessee. Understanding the regional context is essential for funders, land managers, and implementation partners seeking to understand why this project is positioned for success and why the timing for investment is right.



## ***A Regional Plan Built from the Ground Up***

The Cumberland–Pine Mountain Corridor Outdoor Recreation Plan was developed over 12 months with support from The Nature Conservancy’s Cumberland Forest Project and the Appalachian Regional Commission. The planning process engaged more than 60 stakeholders across the three-state corridor, reviewed over 60 existing local and regional plans, and produced a strategic investment framework grounded in existing community priorities rather than external prescription.

The corridor is bookended by two of the region’s most significant public lands — Breaks Interstate Park and Cumberland Gap National Historical Park — and encompasses over 300,000 acres of publicly accessible recreational land. This landscape, including 253,000+ acres of TNC-conserved land within the Cumberland Forest Project area, represents one of the most compelling conservation and recreation investment opportunities in the eastern United States.

### **Project Phases**

#### **Phase 1 — Cumberland–Pine Mountain Corridor Recreation Plan**

The foundational three-state, 13-county recreation strategy that identified the Russell Fork Blueway as a priority investment opportunity.

#### **Phase 1.5 — Russell Fork Blueway Activation Strategy**

This document — a site-specific implementation roadmap that translates the Cumberland–Pine Mountain Plan recommendations into a grant-ready, partner-aligned action plan for the Russell Fork corridor.

#### **Phase 2 — Site Improvements & Funding**

Capital investment in priority access points, infrastructure improvements, and secured grant funding across the seven identified Russell Fork sites.

#### **Phase 3 — Marketing, Activation & Community Capacity**

Corridor-wide marketing, visitor experience programming, outfitter and business development, and long-term community capacity building to sustain and grow the blueway as a regional economic engine.

## The Russell Fork as a Flagship Project

Among the nine Pitch Book projects, the Russell Fork River Blueway was identified as one of two projects ready for immediate Phase 2 activation. This designation reflects the confluence of existing partner relationships, demonstrated recreational demand, available public land, and a clear pathway to construction-ready design within a near-term planning horizon.

The Russell Fork corridor has been the subject of sustained interest from land managers, user groups, and community partners across Virginia and Kentucky for over a decade. What has been missing is a unified strategy, a cross-state coordination structure, and investment-grade planning documentation to carry the project from concept to construction. Phase 2 delivers all three.



### WHY RECREATION? WHY NOW?

The planning area faces measurable economic headwinds that give urgency to this work:

- ◆ 9 of the 13 counties addressed in the plan are federally designated as economically distressed by the Appalachian Regional Commission
- ◆ More than 11% of the regional population has been lost since 2010, with continued out-migration among working-age residents
  - ◆ Over \$1 billion in mining earnings has been lost across the region between 2001 and 2022, suggesting a need to diversify industries in the region
- ◆ Infrastructure investment gaps mean that existing visitor demand is not being fully captured or converted into community economic benefit

# STEERING COMMITTEE ALIGNMENT

One of the most significant outputs of Phase 1 was relationship-building. For the first time, land managers, agency partners, tourism officials, and community leaders from Virginia and Kentucky were convened in the same room under a unified project vision for the Russell Fork River corridor. Phase 2 builds on this foundation of collaboration. Table 1 outlines opportunities for future working groups based on strengths identified during the May 2026 site visit.

**TABLE 1. POTENTIAL FUTURE WORKING GROUPS**

<b>WORKING GROUP</b>	<b>FOCUS</b>	<b>MEMBERS</b>
Tourism Marketing & Storytelling	Promoting the corridor to paddlers, visitors, and media	Sabrina Stanley; Jeff Hess (HOA); Daniel Flores (BIP); Ronnie Hilton (Breaks); Austin Bradley
Land Management & Maintenance	Long-term stewardship of access points, trails, signage, and infrastructure	Daniel Flores (BIP); Ronnie Hilton (Breaks); Austin Bradley
Grant Development & Funding Strategy	Identifying, applying for, and managing grant funding	Dana Cronkhite; Austin Bradley; Nathan Bryant; Jacob Anderson; Grandall Potter
Small Business & Hospitality	Supporting growth of outfitters, guides, shuttle services, lodging, and dining	Dana Cronkhite; Jeff Hess (HOA)
Policy, Permitting & Cross-State Coordination	Navigating multi-state regulations, easements, and KY/VA alignment	Jeff Williams (DWR); Emily Watling (KDFWR)
Project Management & Implementation	Coordinating construction, contractors, and timelines	Grandall Potter

## EARLY WINS

### *Cross-State Coordination: A Structural Achievement*

Coordinating across a state line is a relational and institutional challenge. Virginia and Kentucky have separate wildlife agencies, park systems, permitting frameworks, and funding streams. Bringing these entities into a shared planning process required the sustained investment in relationship-building that predated the formal launch of Phase 2.

A reciprocal fishing license agreement between Virginia and Kentucky – currently in progress – represents one of the most tangible structural outcomes of this alignment work. Once finalized, the agreement will allow anglers to fish the Russell Fork corridor under a single license, eliminating a significant barrier to recreational use and setting a legal and institutional precedent for cross-state cooperation on this river system.

“Many of the land managers and agency professionals working along this corridor had heard of each other for years and had never officially been in the same room. That is the infrastructure gap we were building. Not trails. Relationships.”

-Cumberland Gap Steering Committee Member, April '25

## WORKING GROUP PROCESS

The Phase 2 working group was formally convened on May 7, 2026, at Breaks Interstate Park, followed by a full-day field assessment of proposed and existing access points on May 8. The meeting structure was designed to accomplish three goals:

- Surface site-specific knowledge from the partners who manage, use, and live alongside the river, knowledge that no consultant or planning document can replicate
- Validate the access point framework developed in Phase 1 and identify corrections, additions, or resequencing needed before design work begins
- Establish shared ownership of the project among the agencies and localities who will ultimately be responsible for implementing, maintaining, and championing the access points over time

The working group meeting was followed immediately by a leadership reception that included members of the broader Cumberland–Pine Mountain Corridor steering committee, regional funders, and elected officials.

## WHAT HAS ALREADY BEEN ACHIEVED?



Complete!

### Tri-State Regional Plan

The Cumberland–Pine Mountain Corridor Outdoor Recreation Plan is complete, published, and in active distribution. It is the first unified outdoor recreation strategy ever produced for the SW Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, and NE Tennessee region. The plan has been presented at the national level, including a featured session at the National Outdoor Recreation Conference in June 2026.



Complete!

### Pitch Book

Nine project-specific Pitch Books have been produced, each containing partner identification, cost estimates, funding pathways, maintenance frameworks, and implementation sequencing. These deployment-ready investment documents are designed for direct use in grant applications, funder conversations, and legislative briefings.



Complete!

### Phase 2 Working Group Convened

The Russell Fork Phase 2 Working Group was formally launched in May 2026, bringing together VA DWR, KY DFWR, Breaks Interstate Park, the Town of Haysi, Elkhorn City, USACE, USFS, TNC, and community partners for the first unified project kickoff. A full-corridor field assessment was completed immediately following the working group kickoff.



In Progress!

### Reciprocal Fishing License Agreement

A cross-state reciprocal fishing license agreement between Virginia and Kentucky is currently advancing. Once finalized, this agreement will eliminate one of the most significant regulatory barriers to recreational use of the corridor and signal a new era of bi-state resource management cooperation on the Russell Fork.



In Progress!

### Economic Impact Analysis

Data has been compiled to demonstrate the economic potential of river recreation and improved access. Case studies show that formalizing access can provide localized economic benefits, generate recurring revenue, and support place-based investment.

# EXISTING CONDITIONS

## RUSSELL FORK OF THE BIG SANDY RIVER: CORRIDOR OVERVIEW

The Russell Fork of the Big Sandy River holds the designation of a Virginia State Scenic River. Its waters flow to the Big Sandy River, then the Ohio River, and ultimately the Mississippi River. Water quality throughout this corridor has varied over the past decades (Appalachian Voices) due to upstream impacts from mining activity and insufficient riparian buffers. These conditions underscore the importance of sustained investment in this watershed.

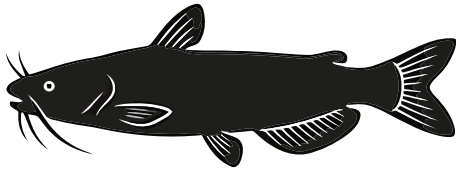
The landscape surrounding the river is a compelling natural asset. As documented in the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources Scenic River Report, the corridor is “very diverse with striking extremes in topography, varied river sections and unique boulders and landform features,” offering experiences ranging from intimate, enclosed passages to sweeping open vistas. Seasonal dam releases and shifting weather patterns further enhance the distinctive character of this environment. The VADWR has recognized the area as ecologically significant, with notable biodiversity throughout the corridor.

The proposed Blueway encompasses an approximately 15-mile corridor connecting the towns of Haysi, Virginia, and Elkhorn City, Kentucky, which is a stretch of river with outstanding recreational, ecological, and economic development potential.

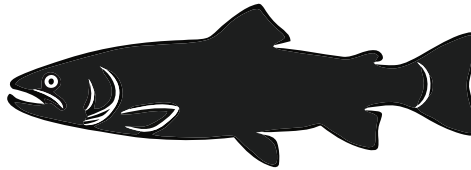


## FISHERIES RESOURCES

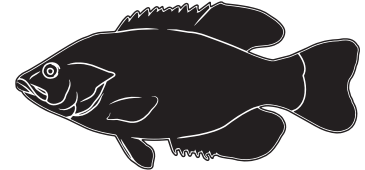
This section of the Russell Fork supports a rich variety of fish species and contains several quality fisheries. The river is actively stocked, and the Pound River below Flannigan Dam represents the largest tailwater fishery in southwest Virginia. Cold-water releases from the dam create unique thermal habitat that sustains a healthy population of Brown Trout which is a significant draw for anglers throughout the region.



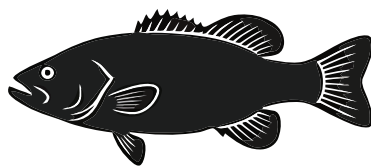
*Channel Catfish*



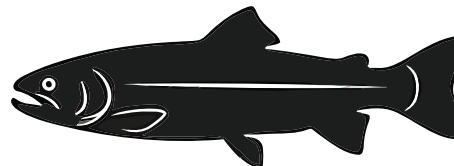
*Brown Trout*



*Rock Bass*



*Smallmouth Bass*



*Rainbow Trout*

## HYDROLOGY

Three USGS river gauges monitor flows within the project corridor:

- ◆ Russell Fork at Haysi, VA  
Station ID: 03208500 (Contributing watershed: 286 sq. mi.)
- ◆ Russell Fork at Bartlick, VA  
Station ID: 03209200 (Contributing watershed: 526 sq. mi.)
- ◆ Russell Fork at Elkhorn City, KY  
Station ID: 03209300 (Contributing watershed: 554 sq. mi.)

Average flows reach approximately 475 cfs in spring and fall below 100 cfs during the driest summer months. Peak managed flows range from 800 to 1,100 cfs, driven by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers releases from Flannigan Dam reservoir, which occur each weekend in October under an existing interagency agreement. River slope varies considerably along the corridor – from flatwater pools to steep gradient drops – producing multiple Class IV through V+ rapids that require advanced paddling skills.

## EXISTING USER GROUPS

The Russell Fork corridor currently serves a dedicated base of recreational users, including anglers, whitewater paddlers, swimmers, and tubers. The active user base demonstrates demand for recreational access and illustrates opportunity for expanded public use.

# BARRIERS TO ACCESS AND USE

Realizing the full recreational and economic potential of the Russell Fork corridor requires targeted investment to address several interconnected barriers.

## Physical Access

The terrain along this section of the river, particularly through the gorge section in Breaks Interstate Park, is exceptionally steep, with slopes exceeding 20% throughout much of the corridor (VADWR). This topography limits safe, convenient access to the river. Current public access points are limited and geographically dispersed, which can extend trips for recreational paddlers beyond desirable lengths. Furthermore, existing access points have limited parking capacity and often require four-wheel-drive vehicles due to steep grades and winding rural roads, which require frequent, expensive maintenance after storms. Lastly, there are no ADA accessible access points on this section of the Russell Fork.

### Safety on the Russell Fork

Safety on the Russell Fork is also a top priority. The Russell Fork is an active river, with constantly changing flows due to storms, dam releases, and topography. Swimming or paddling in an active river is inherently risky and the Russell Fork is no exception. Investing in communication infrastructure, signage, and access points that facilitate trips for multiple types of recreational use will help make the river exciting and memorable for all.

## Information and Wayfinding

Limited wayfinding and signage makes access points difficult to locate for first-time visitors. Information provided across websites may be out of date, inconsistent, or just difficult to find, limiting understanding of the current status of river flows and safe places to recreate.



## Visitor Spotlight

“The Russell Fork is unlike anything else in the Southeast. It’s pushy, it’s powerful, and it takes a few years to really get comfortable with it – but once you do, it becomes one of those rivers you come back to every fall without question.

What keeps me coming back isn’t just the whitewater. It’s the gorge. That remote, deep-canyon feeling is something you can’t manufacture. And then you get to Elkhorn City, and the town just opens its arms to the kayaking community. We camp, we eat, we hang out – it’s become a mini family reunion every October. Some of my closest friendships were built on this river.

The Russell Fork doesn’t need to be made easy. It needs to be made safe and accessible for the people who are ready for it. That’s the sweet spot.”

-Adriene Levknecht, Professional Kayaker – Greenville, NC

*Traveling to paddle the Russell Fork since 2008*

## Barriers Specific to Recreation Type

### SWIMMING AND TUBING

Flow fluctuations present safety risks for swimmers, waders, and tubers, particularly upstream of rapids. During low-flow summer months, conditions may render tubing and swimming impractical. No tube rental businesses currently operate in the vicinity, limiting entry points for casual recreational users. Additionally, cold-water releases from Flannigan Dam at the Pound River confluence create challenging conditions for water contact recreation in that area.

### PADDLING

Running whitewater rivers is inherently risky. The gorge rapids between Garden Hole and Ratliff Hole are suitable only for highly experienced whitewater paddlers, limiting the number of paddlers who can access them. The gorge rapids are an enormous draw for paddlers on October weekends due to Flannigan Dam releases, which create pushy, dangerous V+ flows and a large spike in visitation from whitewater paddlers around the world. However, the river through the gorge is a highly technical run at lower levels as well. The shuttle logistics required to run the river present a further barrier, as the road distance between access points is substantially greater than the corresponding river

mileage, which is a deterrent for visitors unfamiliar with the area. The river between Bartlick Bridge and Garden Hole is a more intermediate, Class II-IV option for whitewater paddlers, but the existing put-in is undeveloped. There is also a lower section from Ratliff Hole access, rated Class II-III, that is occasionally used by paddlers.

## **FISHING**

Wade fishing is not recommended when flows exceed 300 cfs at the Haysi or Bartlick USGS gauge, restricting angler access during higher water periods. The complexity of navigating the gorge further limits fishing opportunity. As noted on the Breaks Interstate Park website, the Russell Fork within park boundaries is not floatable under typical conditions, and anglers are advised to remain within designated flatwater sections given the hazards posed by adjacent rapids.

A reciprocal fishing license agreement between Virginia and Kentucky is currently in progress. This is a development that will significantly expand angler access once finalized. The proposed agreement spans from Skegg Hole at the upstream boundary to a downstream terminus at Elkhorn City.

### **Industry Spotlight**

“The Russell Fork has long been a popular destination for Class V paddlers, and I know from firsthand experience how magical the gorge is. This plan would expand access, enhance safety, and create connectivity, allowing more levels of paddlers to experience this special place, which is a great thing for the paddling community.”

-Jed Hinkley, Competition Director, ACA Paddlesports

### **Local User Spotlight**

“My favorite memory is checking out of school and going wading with my dad. I was eight or nine years old and caught the biggest fish of my life. It was the happiest day of my life”

-Drake Howell Haysi, Va.

## ACCESS LOCATIONS

The following eight existing or potential access points have been identified within the project corridor. Each present both opportunity and site-specific barriers warranting targeted improvement:

- ◆ Haysi Sandlick Road Access
- ◆ Winding Road Access
- ◆ Campground Access
- ◆ Pound River Confluence and Bartlick Splash Dam Portage
- ◆ Skegg Hole Access
- ◆ Garden Hole Access
- ◆ Ratliff Hole Access
- ◆ Carson Island Access
- ◆ Elkhorn City Access

Detailed assessments of existing conditions and proposed improvements at each location are provided in the Conceptual Design and Capital Improvements Chapter.

# CONCEPTUAL DESIGN & CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS





PROJECT TYPE: CONSTRUCTION

## RUSSELL FORK RIVER WHITEWATER & SCENIC BLUEWAY

### *Expanding access to a scenic Blueway corridor*

The Russell Fork River flows more than 50 miles through both Virginia and Kentucky. It is a popular river for fishing and provides opportunities for high-quality recreational fishing. It is also a well-known river for paddling, including some sections with Class V and Class VI whitewater in Breaks Canyon, as it flows through Breaks Interstate Park. While there are world class rapids available for highly skilled paddlers, there are also many sections of the Russell Fork River that are more tame and could be enjoyed by paddlers of varying skill levels.

The implementation of a scenic Blueway will include enhancing public access points along the Russell Fork River to support a full spectrum of river opportunities including fishing, paddling, whitewater, and scenic floats.

### ACTIVITY TYPES



**Kayak/Canoe:** Includes both whitewater boating and recreational boating access, non-motorized vessels only



**Fishing:** Includes bank fishing or wading, licensed fishing only



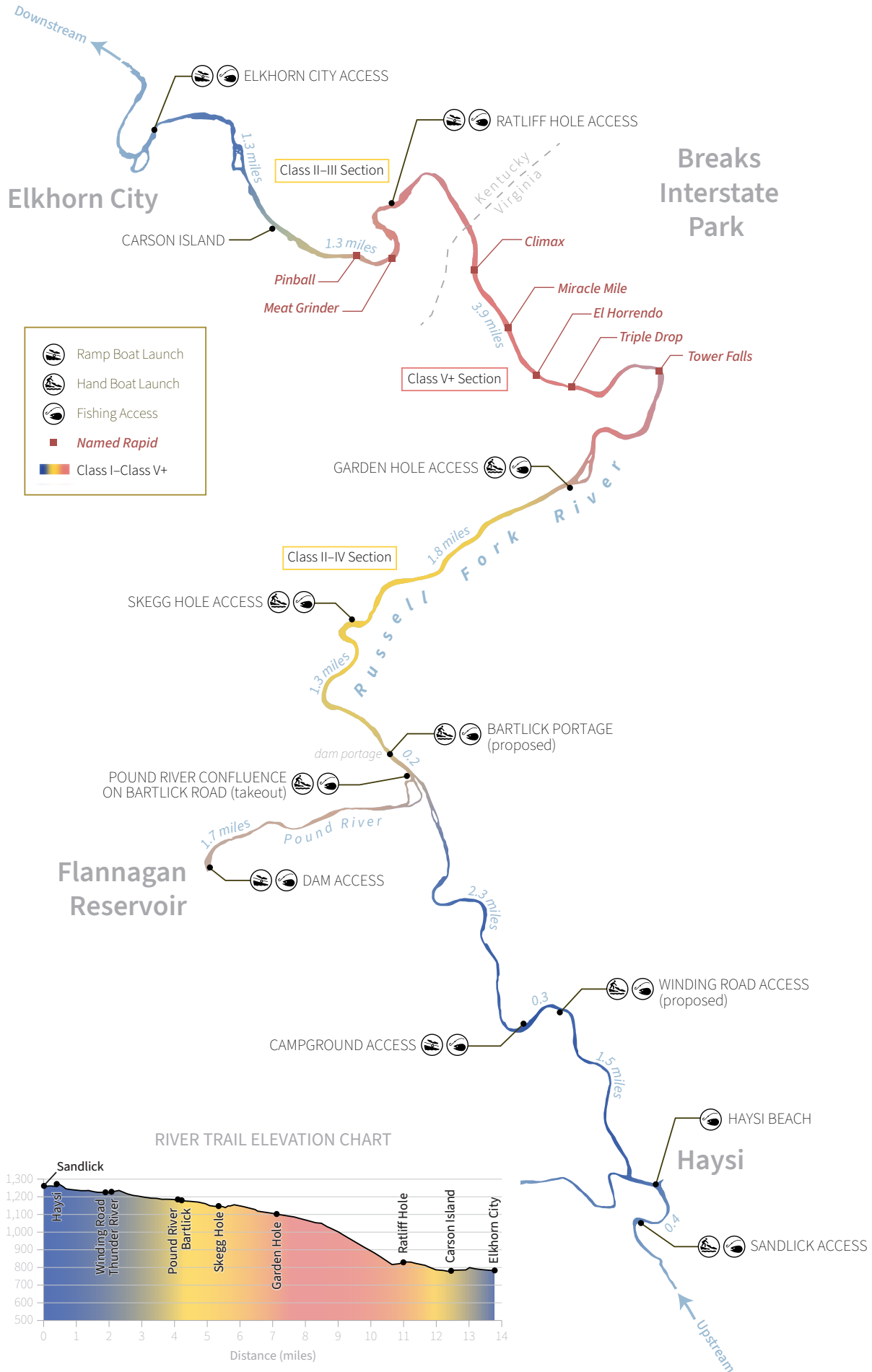
**Tubing:** Includes access for floating on tubes

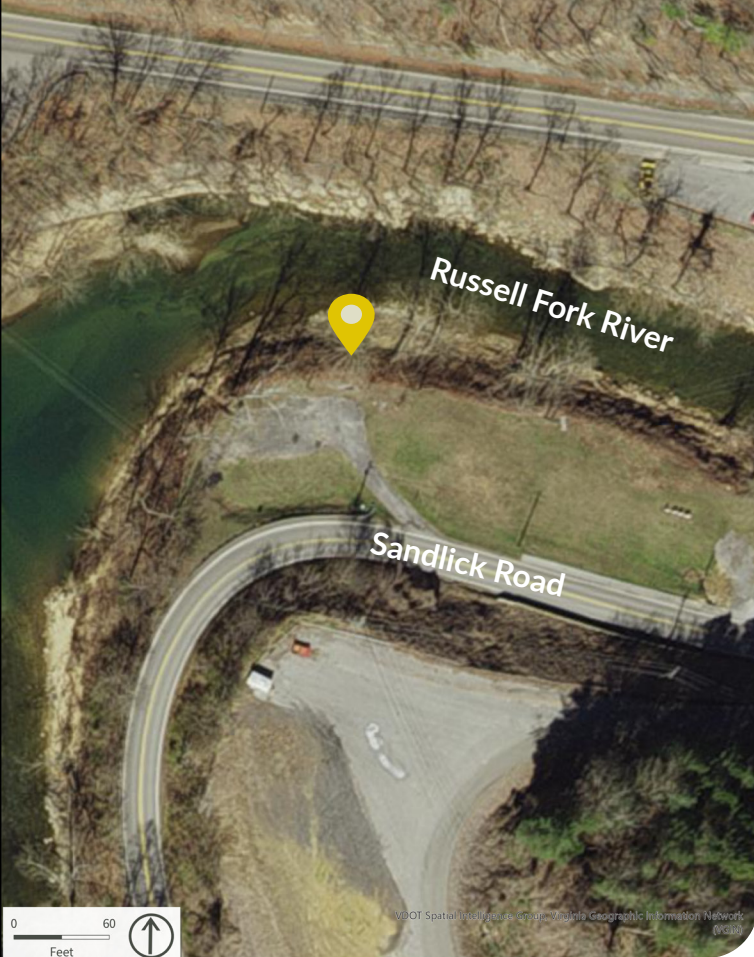


**Swimming:** Includes recreational swimming or wading

# RUSSELL FORK RIVER

WHITEWATER & SCENIC BLUEWAY





82.2939532 W, 37.2007211 N

LOCATION

# HAYSI SANDLICK ACCESS

LANDOWNER

Town of Haysi, Dickenson County Board of Supervisors

ACTIVITIES



Fishing



Swimming

CURRENT CONDITIONS

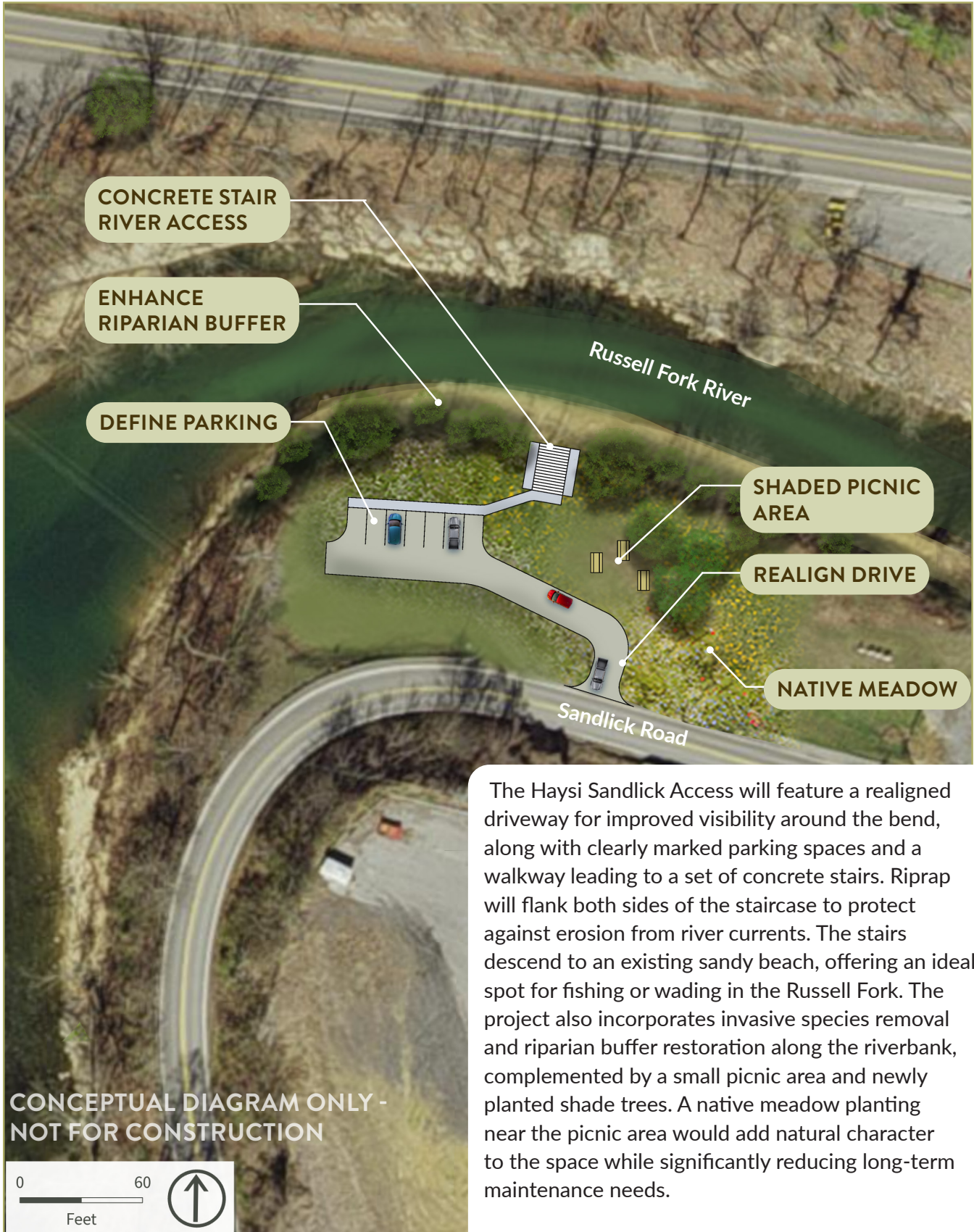
- Vehicular Access to Site: Driveway access and paved parking area exist. Drive access on outside of curve along Sandlick Road and has poor visibility for entry/exit
- River Access Condition: River access exists but needs improvement. Natural surface trail, steep access, small makeshift wooden stair present. Access leads to point bar and is used for fishing access at pool.
- Bank condition: Steep bank, Japanese knotweed present. Bank becomes less steep on downstream end of property.
- Amenities: Trash can is present.
  - Parking: Existing gravel parking area (Approximately 80' X 55')
- Utilities: overhead electric, water line, sewer line at toe of bank

PRIORITY IMPROVEMENTS

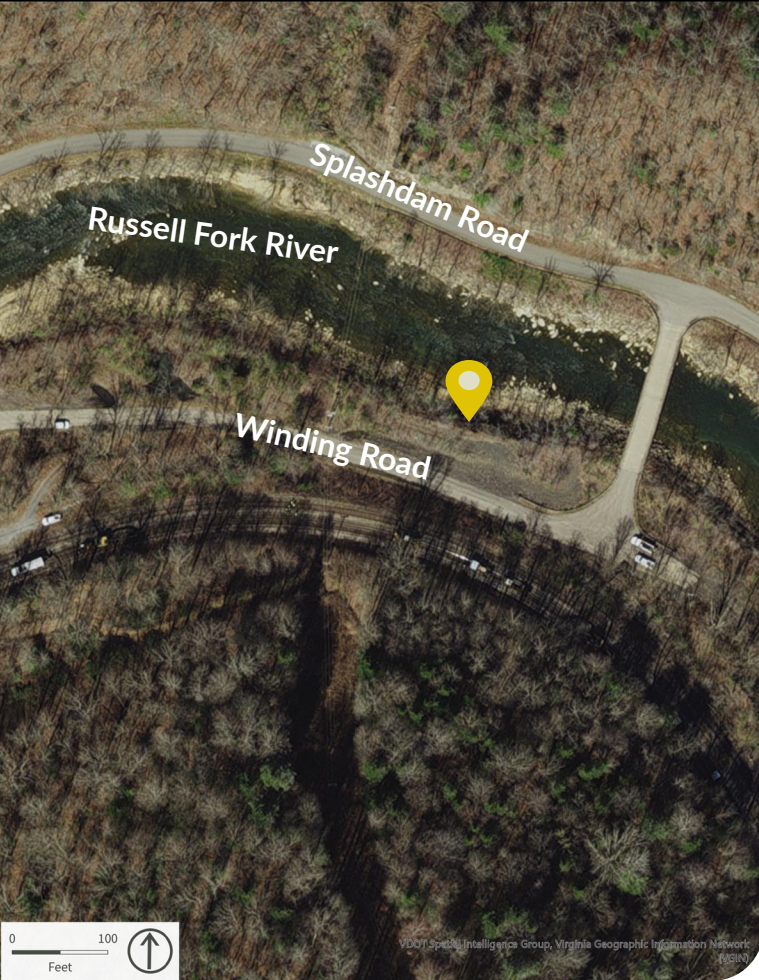
- Improve Parking Area
- Realign drive for safer ingress/egress
- Enhance riparian buffer
- Concrete stair access
- River access signage
- Add mobile wi-fi for cell phone access



# HAYSI SANDLICK ACCESS



The Haysi Sandlick Access will feature a realigned driveway for improved visibility around the bend, along with clearly marked parking spaces and a walkway leading to a set of concrete stairs. Riprap will flank both sides of the staircase to protect against erosion from river currents. The stairs descend to an existing sandy beach, offering an ideal spot for fishing or wading in the Russell Fork. The project also incorporates invasive species removal and riparian buffer restoration along the riverbank, complemented by a small picnic area and newly planted shade trees. A native meadow planting near the picnic area would add natural character to the space while significantly reducing long-term maintenance needs.



82.3036314 W, 37.2208372 N

LOCATION

# WINDING ROAD

LANDOWNER

Cumberland Forest Highlands LLC

ACTIVITIES



Fishing



Tubing



Kayak/  
Canoe

CURRENT CONDITIONS

- Vehicular Access to Site: Sharp turn on Winding Road limits sight for drivers. Active railroad is parallel to Winding Road. Apparent perennial stream present opposite parking site, and outfall of stream to river undetermined.
- River Access Condition: Steep slope down to river edge. Existing gob pile (coal mining waste) along Winding Road that increases elevation difference to access river edge which is already significant.
- Bank condition: Bank access to the river is a steep, forested slope with boulders.
- Amenities:
  - Parking: Limited space for vehicular parking along Winding Road. If gob pile is removed, a larger parking area would be possible.
  - Limited cell phone service
- Utilities: Overhead Electric

PRIORITY IMPROVEMENTS

- Remove gob pile to inhibit potential leaching into river
- Concrete stair access
- Grade in parking pad with gravel base
- Add mobile wi-fi for cell phone access





82.3079619 W, 37.2197411 N

LOCATION

# CAMPGROUND

LANDOWNER

Town of Haysi

ACTIVITIES



Fishing



Tubing



Swimming



Kayak/  
Canoe

CURRENT CONDITIONS

- Vehicular Access to Site: Access under railroad bridge on Splashdam Road
- River Access Condition: Floodplain Forest, gentle bank, access into river upstream of campground
- Bank condition: Gentle grade with sand
- Amenities: Adjacent to Thunder River Campground playground
  - Parking: none
- Utilities: water line

PRIORITY IMPROVEMENTS

- Funding is secured by local partners for public access in this location
- Add mobile wi-fi for cell phone access

Note: Improvements and upgrades to existing facilities are planned





82.3219042 W, 37.2433910 N

LOCATION

# POUND RIVER CONFLUENCE ON BARTLICK ROAD

LANDOWNER

Cumberland Forest Highlands LLC

ACTIVITIES



Fishing



Swimming



Kayak/  
Canoe

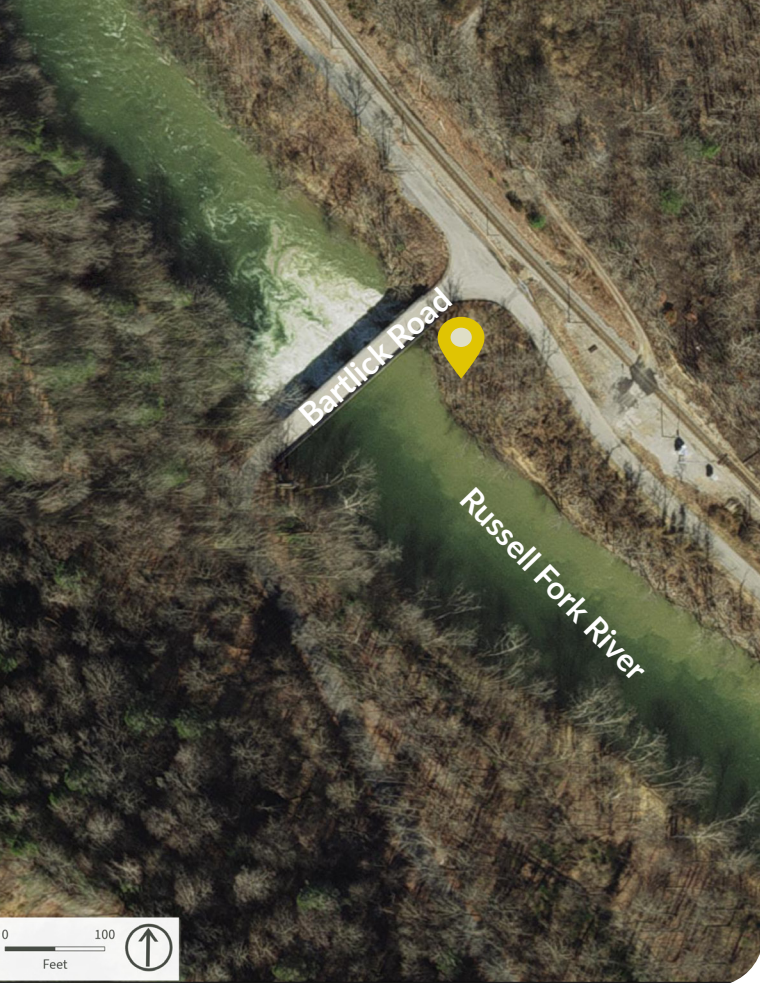
CURRENT CONDITIONS

- Vehicular Access to Site: Existing VADWR access off Bartlick Road. Entrance is a 730' single lane gravel driveway leading to a gravel parking area.
- River Access Condition: Single yellow bollard at top of natural surface path to river confluence
- Bank condition: Gentle grade on stone beach
- Amenities:
  - Parking: Existing gravel parking area
  - Limited cell phone service
- Utilities: None observed

PRIORITY IMPROVEMENTS

- Improvements to natural surface trail to river to make more accessible
- Signage addressing portage needed downstream at splash dam
- Install wayfinding signage for visibility from Bartlick Road
- Add mobile wi-fi for cell phone access





82.323458 W, 37.245495 N

LOCATION

# PORTAGE AT BARTLICK SPLASHDAM

LANDOWNER

Cumberland Forest Highlands LLC

ACTIVITIES



Kayak/  
Canoe

CURRENT CONDITIONS

- River Access Condition: Forested slope adjacent to Bartlick Road on river right
- Bank condition: Upstream of dam bank has gentle grade with steep natural surface trail up to Bartlick Road. Downstream of dam has gentle grade and sand beach.

PRIORITY IMPROVEMENTS

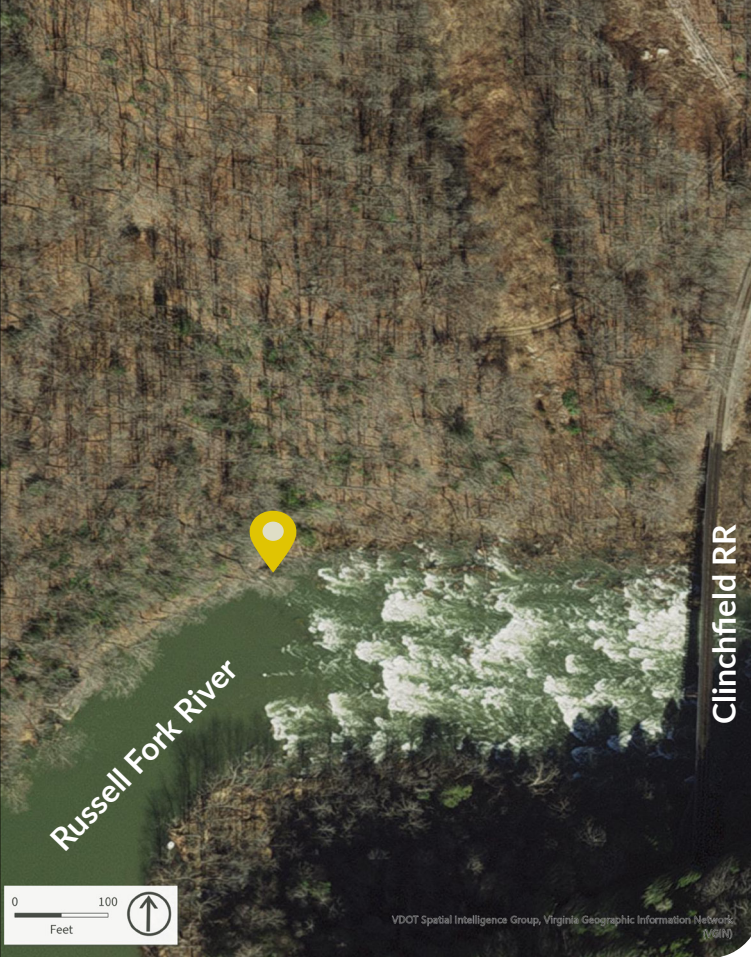
- Create a paddle-access only portage which includes a defined natural surface trail to access road from upstream and additional trail to access river downstream
- Install signage for river users to access portage around dam



# PORTAGE AT BARTLICK SPLASHDAM

For the Russell Fork Blueway to function as a continuous waterway, boaters must have a reliable portage option around the splash dam structure. Giving paddlers the ability to bypass the 8-foot drop is a critical safety consideration as this plan becomes implemented drawing more users to the river. A natural surface trail with clear signage alerting paddlers to the approaching drop and available portage route is essential to establishing a fully navigable blueway along this stretch of the Russell Fork River.





82.3284960 W, 37.2583186 N

LOCATION

# SKEGG HOLE ACCESS

LANDOWNER

U.S. Forest Service

ACTIVITIES



Fishing



Kayak/  
Canoe

CURRENT CONDITIONS

- Vehicular Access to Site: Access via Old Three C Road; high clearance vehicle required; 4WD needed for final approach to river. Must cross private parcel— starts on USFS, crosses private land, returns to USFS. Road too rutted to navigate within ~¼ mile of river; limited ATV use evident
- River Access Condition: Site on outside bend of a large, quiet pool – little to no current; too deep and silty to wade
- Bank condition: Heavy Japanese Knotweed present along access corridor
- Amenities: Very secluded; may be difficult to locate even with improved road
  - Parking: none
  - Limited cell phone service
- Utilities: none

PRIORITY IMPROVEMENTS

- Resolve land access/easement
- Improve road surface to allow standard vehicle access (at minimum high-clearance; ideally graded gravel)
- Invasive species management – Japanese Knotweed removal along corridor
- Install signage and wayfinding (site is difficult to locate from public road)
- Designate put-in / take-out area for paddlers with bank stabilization
- Add bank fishing access point (wading not viable due to pool depth and silt)
- Add mobile wi-fi for cell phone access





82.3024824 W, 37.2709146 N

## LOCATION

# GARDEN HOLE ACCESS

## LANDOWNER

Breaks Interstate Park

## ACTIVITIES



Fishing



Kayak/  
Canoe

## CURRENT CONDITIONS

- Vehicular Access to Site: Gravel road (Garden Hole Road) access from Breaks Park Road (3,915' long) with very steep sections and drainage issues. Drainage on roadsides near river access very eroded.
- River Access Condition: Natural surface drop off into pool with a gravel narrow road leading to drop off.
- Bank condition: Steep with erosion present, exposed roots and Japanese Knotweed
- Amenities:
  - Parking: Two gravel parking areas (approx. 150' X 45' and 200' X 45')
  - Limited cell phone service
  - Utilities: None
  - Camp Branch Trail (Breaks Interstate Park) crosses Garden Hole Road twice

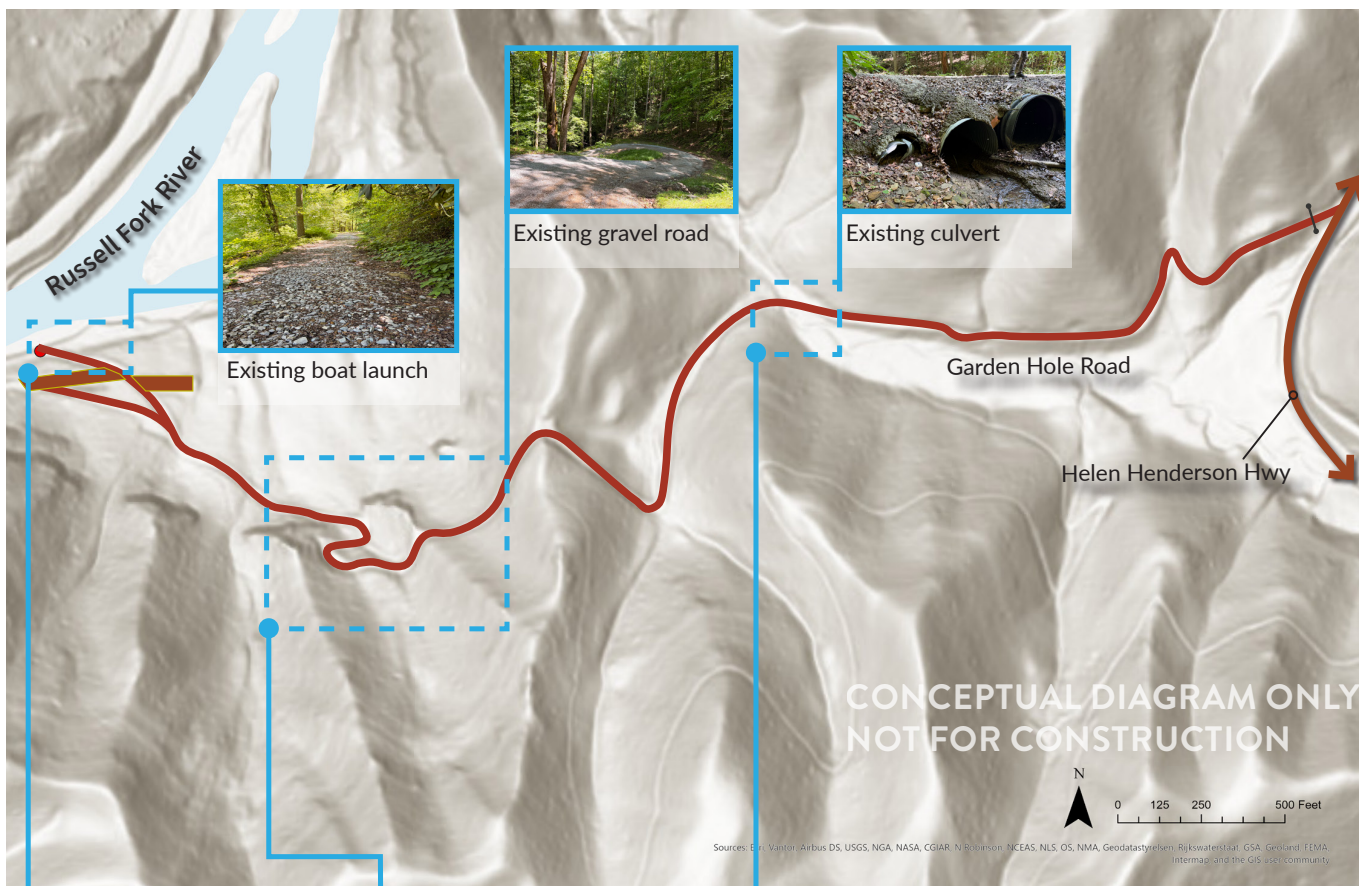
## PRIORITY IMPROVEMENTS

- Long term road maintenance support
- Pave steep sections of road and improve drainage – include culverts
- Create hardened river access for periods of intense use
- Add mobile wi-fi for cell phone access



# GARDEN HOLE ROAD ACCESS

Garden Hole Road serves as the sole access point to the Russell Fork River at this location. The single-lane gravel road features significant elevation changes and notably steep sections, making it particularly vulnerable to damage during heavy rainfall. While a full-length paving and reconstruction project would represent a substantial investment, several targeted improvements could dramatically extend the road's durability through the heavy October weekend traffic and storm events. Key priorities should include paving the steepest sections, upgrading the culvert crossing, and constructing a hardened boat ramp at the river's edge.

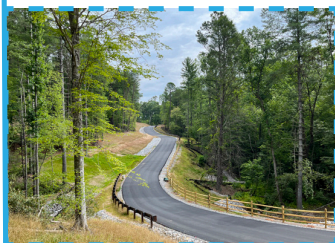


Harden access ramp to prevent sediment entering river and install drainage features



Double-sided access stairs with kayak slides to allow for two-way movement at access point.

Pave and improve storm drainage along steep sections of Garden Hole Road



Pave Garden Hole Road to prevent against future washout of the road and ongoing maintenance to repair it.

Replace existing culvert crossing with larger size and partially bury to pass stream flows



Larger culverts will allow higher water flows and debris to pass through without damaging the roadway. Partially burying creates a continuous natural stream bed for aquatic organism passage.



82.3237928 W, 37.2980796 N

LOCATION

# RATLIFF HOLE ACCESS

LANDOWNER

Breaks Interstate Park

ACTIVITIES



Fishing



Swimming



Kayak/  
Canoe

CURRENT CONDITIONS

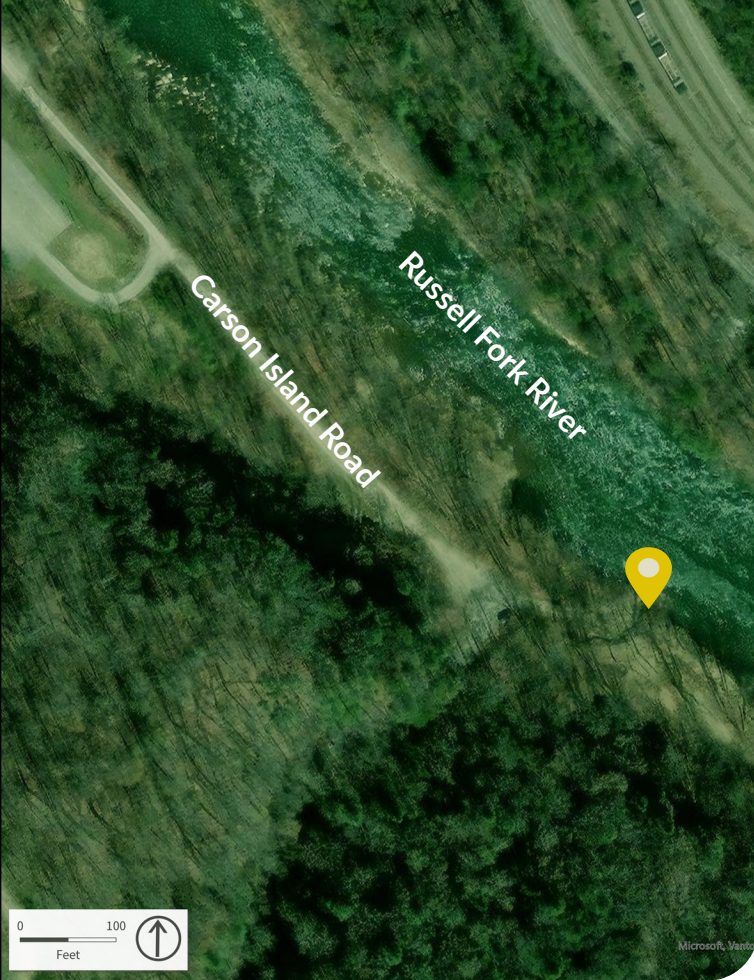
- Vehicular Access to Site: Paved access road off of Patty Loveless Drive, approximately 150' long
- River Access Condition: Rocky terrain, gentle slope, pool
- Bank condition: River rock beach with gentle slope. Erosion present when paved ramp section ends, before rock beach.
- Amenities:
  - Parking: Paved lot with 16 spaces as well as gravel parking area
  - Covered shelter with fireplace
  - Restrooms (not currently usable)
  - Lighting at parking area but lights do not operate
  - Utilities: Electric
  - No cell phone service. Emergency response services - primary response site

PRIORITY IMPROVEMENTS

- Restore restroom facilities
- Add mobile wi-fi for cell phone access

Note: Improvements and upgrades to existing facilities are planned





82.3237928 W, 37.2980796 N

LOCATION

# CARSON ISLAND ACCESS

LANDOWNER

Breaks Interstate Park

ACTIVITIES



Fishing



Swimming



Kayak/  
Canoe

CURRENT CONDITIONS

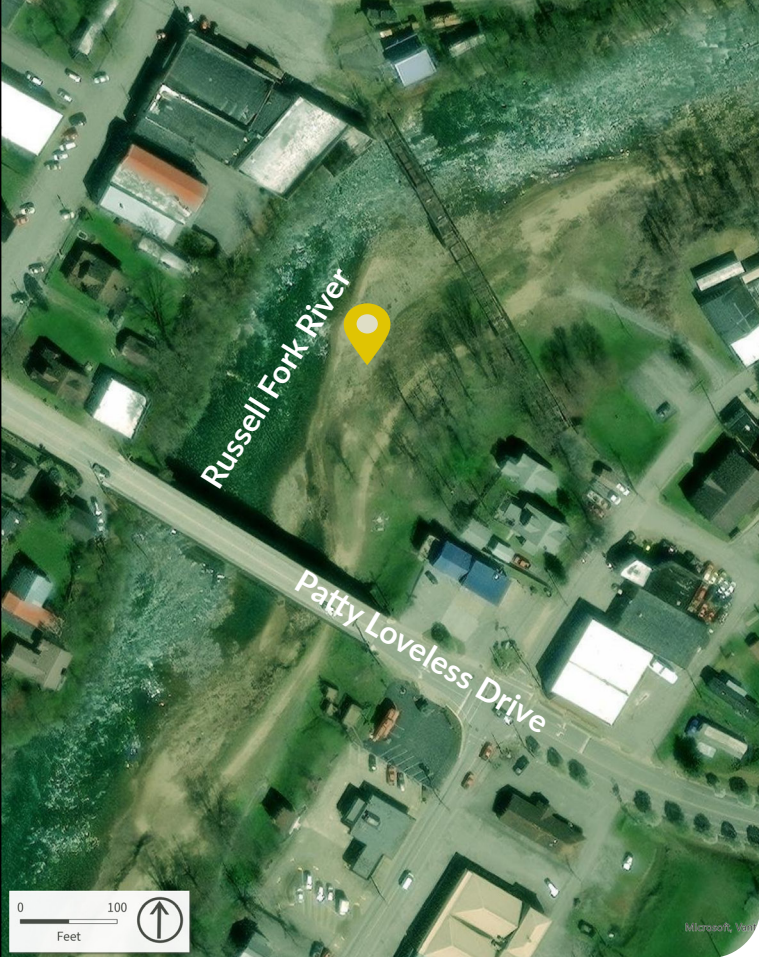
- Vehicular Access to Site: Carson Island Road is gravel and in poor condition with many potholes and drainage issues.
- River Access Condition: Natural Surface trail leads to sandy beach, gentle access into calm water
- Bank condition: Gentle sandy slope with Japanese Knotweed present
- Amenities: Pine Mountain Trailhead shelter and parking lot located about 500' before access location along Carson Island Road
  - Parking: No delineated parking at access, but open space is available along roadside
  - Utilities: None

PRIORITY IMPROVEMENTS

- No improvements planned at this time as local support would be needed to implement and maintain.

Note: Breaks Interstate Park Staff have limited capacity to patrol this area for safety.





82.35192 W, 37.30459 N

LOCATION

# ELKHORN CITY BEACH TAKE-OUT

LANDOWNER

City of Elkhorn

ACTIVITIES



Fishing



Swimming



Kayak/  
Canoe

CURRENT CONDITIONS

- Vehicular Access to Site: Located within the city limits with existing road and pedestrian infrastructure nearby. Access road located off W Russell Street.
- River Access Condition: Natural sand/gravel beach on the Russell Fork below Time Out Pizza in downtown Elkhorn City. Serves as an informal take-out point for paddlers completing a run from Ratliff Hole or Carson Island. Beach area is accessible on foot
- Bank condition: Gentle sandy slope. Well utilized, little to no vegetation present.
- Amenities: Picnic Tables, Stage/ Platform, Beach
  - Parking: No delineated parking
  - Utilities: Unknown

PRIORITY IMPROVEMENTS

- City of Elkhorn City has expressed interest in formalizing the beach as a public river access point
- Develop designated parking area to support paddler shuttle logistics
- Install boat/kayak landing ramp or hardened bank edge for safe take-out
- Add signage connecting this site put-in as part of a branded paddle trail segment
- Coordinate with city on amenities (picnic area) to support downtown tourism connection
- Add mobile wi-fi for cell phone access



## ECONOMIC IMPACT AND COMMUNITY RETURN ON INVESTMENT (ROI)

The Russell Fork River Recreation Area represents a clear opportunity to translate targeted infrastructure investment into meaningful local economic growth. Expanded river access through improved put-ins, take-outs, and supporting amenities would activate an already significant visitor base and create new pathways for both residents and visitors to engage more deeply with the river. By enabling paddling, fishing, and overnight recreation, these investments shift the region to an active outdoor recreation hub.



# EXISTING ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE

There is already strong evidence of demand in the region. Breaks Interstate Park alone attracted 256,053 visitors in 2024 and remains one of Virginia’s most visited state parks. Yet, despite this visitation, Dickenson County captures relatively limited economic impact. In 2024, there was \$12.9 million in total visitor spending, \$1.1 million in recreation spending, 137 tourism-supported jobs, and \$0.9 million in tax revenue. This current gap in visitation versus economic impact means there is limited infrastructure and services in place to help convert visitor spending into sustained local economic activity.

Crucially, investment in outdoor recreation must be paired with community support. Existing businesses play a key role in attracting and serving recreation users, while improved quality of life and increased visitor demand create favorable conditions for new business development. Together, these dynamics form the foundation of a thriving outdoor economy that can fully capture the economic impact of its visitors.

# WHAT ECONOMIC IMPACT CAN WE EXPECT?

While it is not possible to predict the exact scale of future economic impact, there is a strong body of evidence from comparable river systems across the United States that provides a reliable benchmark for what the Russell Fork can achieve. These examples consistently show that river recreation generates meaningful local economic returns with relatively modest infrastructure investment, particularly in rural regions with limited alternative tourism drivers.

Research on river recreation demonstrates that whitewater paddling and related activities—such as fishing, tubing, and swimming—create steady, locally distributed spending. Visitors traveling to river destinations typically spend money on lodging, food and beverage, fuel, and retail in nearby communities. Because these activities often extend beyond peak tourism seasons and do not require large-scale built infrastructure, they represent a cost-effective and scalable economic development strategy.<sup>1</sup>

## *Economic Impact of Recreational Fishing*

**Southwest Virginia:** 172,630 resident and non-resident anglers generate \$336 million annually in fishing-related spending, supporting 2,450 jobs and producing \$7 million in state and local tax revenue.<sup>2</sup>

**Eastern Kentucky:** 102,010 anglers generate \$364 million in annual spending, supporting 2,860 jobs and contributing \$26 million in state and local taxes.<sup>3</sup>

1 [Economic Impacts of River Recreation \(2014\)](#)  
2 [2025\\_ASA\\_House\\_Handout\\_Digital\\_9\\_Virginia.pdf](#)  
3 [2025\\_ASA\\_House\\_Handout\\_Digital\\_5\\_Kentucky.pdf](#)

### Case Study: Gauley River National Recreation Area, West Virginia

The Gauley River offers the most relevant model for Russell Fork due to its advanced whitewater, strong paddling culture, and reliance on scheduled releases. Despite attracting a relatively modest 20,000+ commercial users annually, the Gauley generates significant economic impact because of high-value, destination-driven visitation.<sup>4</sup>

Key characteristics include:

- ◆ A defined “season” built around scheduled releases
  - ◆ A strong outfitter and guiding industry
- ◆ Events such as Gauley Fest, which draw thousands of visitors
  - ◆ High rates of repeat use and overnight stays

Research on Gauley users shows that paddlers overall average 57 river outings per year, with approximately 11 overnight trips, indicating a highly engaged user base. Additionally, visitors to the Gauley travel an average of four hours for a paddling experience, suggesting that Russell Fork has the ability to draw from a broad regional market.<sup>5</sup>

The Gauley demonstrates that economic success does not depend on high visitor volume, but rather on high spending per visitor, driven by experience quality, specialization, and supporting services.

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4 [2022 Commercial River Use Report \(2018–2022 trends\)](#)

5 [2007 Gauley Festival Economic Impact Study - American Whitewater](#)

## Case Study: Nantahala-Pisgah Region (NC)

While much closer to population centers, the Nantahala–Pisgah region illustrates how economic impact can scale when infrastructure supports commercial recreation:

- ◆ Noncommercial paddling: ~\$3.2 million annually, with typical stays of 3–4 days
  - ◆ Commercial rafting: ~\$36 million annually, supporting 446 jobs

The distinction between commercial and non-commercial use underscores the importance of outfitter services in maximizing economic returns. Currently, the absence of outfitters in the Russell Fork corridor represents one of the largest missed opportunities for revenue growth.



## HOW DO WE TRACK ECONOMIC IMPACT?

To align with ARC-style return-on-investment metrics, success can be measured through a combination of direct and secondary indicators:

- ◆ **Visitor metrics:** total visitation, river user counts, and overnight stays
- ◆ **Spending indicators:** lodging occupancy, restaurant sales, outfitter revenues
- ◆ **Employment:** tourism and recreation-related job growth
- ◆ **Tax revenue:** local sales and lodging tax increases
- ◆ **Business development:** new startups (outfitters, rentals, retail)

Tracking these indicators annually allows for clear documentation of return on investment and helps refine strategies over time.

### *Immediate Steps to Build a Data Foundation*

Although a full economic impact analysis may occur later, there are practical steps that can begin immediately to establish baseline data and track growth:

- ◆ **Install Counters at Access Points** - Infrared trail counters or traffic counters, such as TRAFx or Eco-Counters, can estimate river usage. Data should be validated with periodic manual counts to ensure accuracy.
- ◆ **Survey River Users** - Conduct in-person and online surveys to gather inputs for future modeling. These surveys should be structured to understand visitor behavior, collect information on trip purpose, length of stay, and track average spending (e.g., food, gas, lodging).

## WHAT ARE KEY DETERMINANTS OF SUCCESS?

While infrastructure is the catalyst, long-term success depends on several reinforcing conditions and addressing leakage.

### Connections to Main Streets and Businesses

Access points should be intentionally located to route visitors through nearby communities, ensuring that spending occurs locally rather than outside the region.

### OPPORTUNITY FOR ACTIVATION: RIVER TOWNS

These communities are located along water trails and cater to water-based recreation users such as kayakers, canoeists, and anglers. Key services include river access points, outfitters, shuttle services, lodging, and waterfront amenities. River town strategies are most successful when coordinated as a regional system connecting multiple towns along a river corridor.

### Case Study: Ohio River Way

The Ohio River Way is a 308 mile National Water Trail across Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana, connecting more than 40 designated River Towns. Through shared branding, trail development, and placemaking, it positions the river as a regional recreational and economic asset. A centralized events calendar further strengthens connectivity by promoting river based and local programming across communities.



## A Welcoming Atmosphere

Visitor perception and community readiness are essential. Communities that actively embrace outdoor recreation, through signage, wayfinding, and local engagement, are more likely to attract repeat visitation and sustained economic activity.

## Amenities and Services

The largest constraint on economic impact around the Russell Fork today is not visitation but the ability to serve visitors. Significant leakage occurs due to gaps in the local service economy:

- ◆ **Lodging:** Dickenson and Pike Counties have extremely limited lodging inventory, forcing visitors to stay in surrounding counties and shifting overnight spending out of the corridor.
- ◆ **Food & Beverage:** Limited restaurant options mean that dining expenditures are often captured in larger nearby commercial centers rather than within local communities.
- ◆ **Outfitter Services:** There are currently no established commercial outfitters operating on the Russell Fork Gorge. As a result, visitors must bring their own equipment or travel to other rivers, such as the Nantahala or New River, for guided experiences.
- ◆ **Retail/Gear:** The absence of paddling and outdoor retail businesses in both counties leads to additional loss of recreation-related spending, as visitors purchase gear elsewhere.
- ◆ **Events:** Events help activate the asset and draw out of region visitors to the area. They often support longer visits, overnight stays, and can create community pride.

### Case Study: French Broad Paddle

The [French Broad Paddle Trail website](#) includes a clean, engaging homepage, highlights on each county, a list of every access point and its status, campsites, and trip planning resources.

### Case Study: Cahaba Blueway

The Cahaba Blueway has a [dedicated Wayfinding and Brand Guide](#) outlining the consistent information and design standards to be used along the 191 miles of the Cahaba River. The system allows for flexibility and personalization of sites and fits a variety of budgets and site needs, while still creating a consistent narrative and sense-of-place for users and visitors as they travel throughout the river corridor.

## BEYOND ECONOMICS: SOCIAL IMPACTS OF RECREATION AMENITIES

The benefits of expanded river access extend well beyond direct economic gains. In regions like Dickenson and Pike Counties, where labor force participation hovers around 54–55%, far below national averages, outdoor recreation provides an accessible development pathway rooted in existing natural assets.

Research shows that investments in outdoor recreation and placemaking are consistently linked to healthier residents, increased visitation and tourism spending, downtown revitalization, and improved business attraction and retention, particularly in rural communities.<sup>6</sup> Communities that intentionally invest in trails, parks, and access to the outdoors are better positioned to attract workers and employers who prioritize livability, while also strengthening local identity and sense of place.<sup>7</sup>

Research focused on Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) counties further reinforces this connection, identifying a positive correlation between places rich in natural amenities and higher overall quality of life.<sup>8</sup>

More broadly, evidence shows that investments in quality of life can be a powerful driver of economic growth. As Dr. Amanda Weinstein of the Center on Rural Innovation explains: “Higher quality of life is not only associated with higher employment and population growth and lower poverty rates, but is more important than the business environment in determining the success of small-town America.”

For this reason, outdoor recreation should be understood not as a discretionary amenity, but as critical infrastructure that, when integrated with broader community development strategies, contributes directly to public health, economic competitiveness, and long-term regional resilience.

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6 Pennsylvania Environmental Council & Fourth Economy. From Rust Belt to Rec Belt. Econsult Solutions, Inc. (2026). Outdoor Recreation, Economic Value, and Quality of Place: A Conversation with Silas Chamberlin.

7 Weinstein, A. L., Hicks, M., & Wornell, E. (2022). An aggregate approach to estimating quality of life in micropolitan areas. *The Annals of Regional Science*.

8 Weinstein, A. (2026) Nature as Infrastructure. West Virginia Outdoor Economy Summit. Conference Presentation.

## NATIONAL RECOGNITION & NATIONAL ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The Russell Fork corridor presents a compelling case for two distinct federal designations each carrying significant implications for long-term protection, investment eligibility, and destination identity. Pursuing both simultaneously would position the corridor as one of the most comprehensively recognized recreation and heritage resources in Appalachia.

### *National Wild and Scenic River Designation*

Wild and Scenic River Designation recognizes waterways with remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, or other similar values. The Russell Fork is an exceptionally strong candidate. It is one of the few rivers in the eastern United States to offer world-class whitewater alongside a biologically rich gorge, significant historic resources, and strong recreation demand — all in a largely free-flowing, undammed state. Designation would strengthen the case for federal investment, add a nationally recognized identity to the corridor’s marketing, and provide a protective framework as visitation grows. A coalition of the Congressional delegation, TNC, DWR, and Breaks Interstate Park is well-positioned to initiate a Wild and Scenic River study and advance the designation through legislation.



### *National Historic Landmark Designation — Bartlick Splash Dam Bridge*

The Bartlick Bridge is a structure of national technological significance: the world’s first reinforced concrete splash dam, constructed by the Yellow Poplar Lumber Company at the turn of the twentieth century to transport logs through the Breaks Gorge to the Big Sandy River and ultimately to sawmills in Kentucky and Ohio. The dam’s construction required extraordinary logistics-- twelve wagons and forty-eight mules hauling 2,500 pounds of cement per team over rough mountain roads. Breaks Interstate Park staff have since traced these trails and have proposed to rehabilitate them as an interpretive trail. The physical evidence of that era is unusually complete: the concrete pillars still stand, the mule path from Elkhorn City through the Breaks to Bartlick has been located, and Breaks staff have recovered a Lidgerwood Hoist System, a Peavey Hook, and the remains of the only documented grindstone quarry in Virginia on park property. National Historic Landmark designation — pursued through the National Park Service — would recognize the Bartlick Bridge as a site of exceptional national significance, making it eligible for a distinct tier of federal preservation funding and interpretive programming support. Paired with the proposed trail system connecting the Breaks museum to Bartlick along the original mule path, and a driving route pushing visitors from the park into the Route 611 corridor toward Birch Knob and Clintwood, the designation would anchor this unique heritage tourism experience.



## Engagement with American Whitewater



Beyond federal designation, the Russell Fork corridor has a direct and underutilized relationship with the nation's primary whitewater advocacy organization. American Whitewater is a nonprofit dedicated to protecting, restoring, and ensuring the safe enjoyment of whitewater rivers across the country – with active work in river access, flow advocacy, water quality, recreation management, and river protection. The Russell Fork is already documented in American Whitewater's river database as one of the premier Class IV–V whitewater runs in the eastern United States. Formalizing that relationship through an affiliate club membership or a direct partnership creates access to American Whitewater's national network, advocacy resources, and safety signage program at a moment when the corridor is actively developing access infrastructure and a public-facing safety messaging strategy.

Three specific American Whitewater resources are directly applicable to the corridor's Phase 2 and Phase 3 work. Their river safety signage program provides standardized, field-tested signage templates designed for whitewater access points – exactly what Garden Hole, Skegg Hole, and the Breaks gorge entry points require. Their navigability toolkit supports land access and legal right-of-passage questions that may arise as the corridor advances private landowner conversations on the Virginia side. And their affiliate club membership structure connects the Russell Fork to the broader paddling community that already drives visitation – providing a channel to reach the documented 14-hour travel market through American Whitewater's communications platforms, event calendar, and membership network.

Initiating contact with American Whitewater staff – and positioning the Russell Fork's access development work as a model of what rural Appalachian whitewater investment can produce – also creates the conditions for the corridor to be featured in the American Whitewater Journal, earn recognition as a priority access advocacy site, and attract the event programming partnerships that turn a seasonal whitewater run into a named destination event on the national paddling calendar.

# IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP AND GRANT READINESS

Development of the Blueway on the Russell Fork River will stretch from Haysi to Elkhorn City, bringing communities together across state lines to create a singular identity through a common connection to the river. However, successful implementation of the Blueway plan will require regional coordination and collaboration across those same state lines, from initiation through long-term maintenance and communication.

The implementation strategy outlined in this chapter is organized into two sections corresponding to specific funding needs identified through this project. The first section outlines the set of targeted, site-specific capital projects that will fund improvements to new and existing access points along the Blueway. Each site-specific capital project is matched to the funder most aligned with its ownership, site type, and community context. The second section outlines the overarching corridor grant initiative, which will fund strategic investments that apply to the full Haysi-to-Elkhorn City Blueway, including communication and wayfinding, promotion, economic connection, community revitalization, and stewardship.



## SITE-SPECIFIC CAPITAL PROJECTS

A key goal of the Russell Fork Blueway is to create additional public access locations and enhance existing access points along the river between Haysi, VA, and Elkhorn City, KY. Increasing public access in appropriate locations can improve opportunities for residents and visitors to enjoy the river in safe and environmentally sensitive ways. The specific projects outlined in this document would create a system of public access locations that offer a wide variety of recreational opportunities while maintaining a cohesive visitor experience. The magnitude and stage of each project vary, but the following implementation steps can apply to most projects.

- ◆ **Fundraising and grant acquisition:** Secure financial backing for planning, design, acquisition (if needed), construction, and maintenance of access points.
- ◆ **Planning:** Analysis for project feasibility, including site availability, access, natural resource conditions, and safety may be required. Specific planning needs have been outlined for each access point.
- ◆ **Land acquisition, easements, or permits:** Complete any necessary land acquisition, required easements, landowner agreements, and anticipated environmental review processes (e.g., US Army Corps of Engineers, Department of Transportation, state or federal environmental organizations, NEPA if applicable).
- ◆ **Design:** Complete design development plans as needed. Design approaches should consider site size, site amenities, potential limitations (topography, existing infrastructure, sensitive environmental/cultural resources, etc.), the life cycle of materials used, and proposed recreation activities and regulations.
- ◆ **Construction:** Construction documentation, details, and specifications should describe a comprehensive construction process as well as a recommended maintenance regime for all components. Areas for staging and stockpiling materials that do not impact sensitive resources should be identified. Construction timing may be limited by seasonal variation in flows or natural resource impacts. Access point construction can occur over phases, if needed. Site preparation, access, parking, and signage can occur in a phase prior to landscaping and installation of amenities like benches or informational kiosks.
- ◆ **Promotion:** Lastly, promoting and celebrating new or improved access points is critical for increasing awareness of the project and the Blueway as a whole. This promotion should be done in coordination with regional promotion or tourism organizations, partners, and user organizations (fishing and paddling groups).

### *Site-Specific Project Needs and Funding Strategies*

Within the corridor framework, ten sites are positioned for targeted capital investment in Phase 1 and Phase 2. Table 2 outlines target funding sources, needs, current status, and next steps for each site.

**TABLE 2. SITE-SPECIFIC PROJECT NEEDS AND FUNDING STRATEGIES**

<i>SITE</i>	<i>PROJECT TYPE</i>	<i>LAND OWNER</i>	<i>TIME HORIZON</i>	<i>TARGET FUNDERS</i>
Haysi Sandlick Access	Improvement	Town of Haysi, Dickenson County Board of Supervisors	Short-term	Virginia Outdoors Foundation, Cumberland Forest Community Fund, ARC
Winding Road	New access point	Cumberland Forest Highlands LLC (DWR)	In Progress	AMLER (funded)
Campground Access	New access point	Town of Haysi	In Progress	Virginia Outdoors Foundation (funded)
Pound River Confluence on Bartlick Road	Improvement	Cumberland Forest Highlands LLC (DWR)	Short-term	DWR, ARC
Portage at Bartlick Road	New portage	Cumberland Forest Highlands LLC (DWR)	Short-term	Proposed: AMLER
Skegg Hole Access	New access point	U.S. Forest Service	Long-term	DWR Forest Service partnership proposed activating: Fishing stamp funds have been proposed to improve access road
Garden Hole Access	Improvement	Breaks Interstate Park	Long-term	Thompson Charitable; Ann and Gene Worrell Foundation, A
Ratliff Hole Access	Improvement	Breaks Interstate Park	In Progress	ARC (approved, awaiting funding)
Elkhorn City Beach Take-Out	Improvement	City of Elkhorn City	Long-term	ARC POWER Implementation, EDA Public Works (if infrastructure scale warrants)

	<i>LEAD APPLICANT / PROJECT CHAMPION</i>	<i>CURRENT STATUS</i>	<i>NEXT STEPS AND NEEDS</i>
on; nity	Dickenson County	Ready to initiate. Site assessed; access defined; landowners interested in improving access.	VOF easement process; landowner agreement; standard grading and access permit needed. Funding round timing and application narrative needed for Cumberland Community Fund.
	DWR	AMLER funding in place; design underway.	Mine reclamation review; no in-water work anticipated. Gob pile characterization; OSMRE compliance plan needed.
on	Haysi	Funding secured, construction underway	Blueway-connected signage and mapping, monitor and maintain
	DWR/ TNC	In use	Improvements proposed
	DWR	Important need to improve river connectivity and safety	Expansion of granted AMLER Funds
o	U.S. Forest Service	Funding secured for Old 3C road maintenance; knotweed treatment funding pending	Road maintenance underway through Clinch Ranger District operations; game stamp funds requested for knotweed treatment, pending confirmation. Additional access development is longer-term for USFS. Wild and Scenic River designation under the recreation category is eligible for this stretch and would be initiated by state and local entities, with USFS informed of management responsibilities upon designation.
and RC	Breaks Interstate Park	Potential funders identified and conversations initiated; design needed	Bank stabilization; potential grading permit; no in-water. Preliminary engineering and Breaks board approval needed.
al)	Breaks Interstate Park	Funded; awaiting ARC final approval	Minimal; ARC compliance review
on; s)	City of Elkhorn City	City interest confirmed; parcel status TBD	Initial application underway Municipal right-of-way; bank work. City Council resolution. For EDA: EDA eligibility confirmation.

# SITE-LEVEL MAINTENANCE ASSIGNMENTS

Clear outlines of maintenance and management responsibilities are often required for grant compliance. For each site, it is recommended that the existing landowner or manager establishes an aligned strategy for long-term site management responsibilities.

**TABLE 3. SITE-LEVEL MAINTENANCE RECOMMENDATIONS**

<i>SITE</i>	<i>PROJECT TYPE</i>	<i>LAND OWNER</i>	<i>SITE-LEVEL MAINTENANCE RESPONSIBILITIES</i>
Haysi Sandlick Access	Improvement	Town of Haysi, Dickenson County Board of Supervisors	Town of Haysi
Winding Road	New access point	Cumberland Forest Highlands LLC (DWR)	DWR, consistent with existing recreational access management responsibilities
Campground Access	New access point	Town of Haysi	Town of Haysi
Pound River Confluence on Bartlick Road	Improvement	Cumberland Forest Highlands LLC (DWR)	DWR, consistent with existing recreational access management responsibilities
Portage at Bartlick Road	New portage	Cumberland Forest Highlands LLC (DWR)	DWR, consistent with existing recreational access management responsibilities
Skegg Hole Access	New access point	U.S. Forest Service	USFS, consistent with National Forest land management, in coordination with private landowner
Garden Hole Access	Improvement	Breaks Interstate Park	Breaks Interstate Park
Ratliff Hole Access	Improvement	Breaks Interstate Park	Breaks Interstate Park
Elkhorn City Beach Take-Out	Improvement	City of Elkhorn City	Elkhorn City, along with KY DWR

## OVERARCHING CORRIDOR INVESTMENT

The corridor-wide grant request for the Russell Fork Blueway will fund the connective tissue that binds the individual site investments into a destination. It creates a compelling narrative that ties the Blueway together as a string of recreational opportunities connected to one resource. Based on initial conversations with leadership, this phase would be considered a strong ARC POWER Grant Proposal. Potential strategies that should be included in this initiative include the following:

- ◆ Promotion of the Russell Fork Blueway through communications and marketing infrastructure (including website, digital trail platform, and print materials).
- ◆ Development of a Russell Fork Blueway logo for signage, branding, placemaking, and marketing materials to accompany a comprehensive wayfinding and signage plan that provides consistent, corridor-wide branding across directional, safety, and interpretive signage
- ◆ Videography and visual storytelling assets to support fundraising and regional promotion that attracts visitors, residents, and economic investment
- ◆ River Clean up programming, including stream sweepers, regular cleanups, and stewardship and education pipeline through programs with schools, partnership with Breaks Interstate Park and land managers, etc.
- ◆ Development of and partnership with outfitter services in later phases of the project

### *Partner Integration Strategy*

Beyond land managers and owners, the following community partner channels are critical to implementation success:

- ◆ **Working group structure** - As a cross-state initiative, the working group that was formed for this project has the potential to provide long-term capacity, regional coordination, and opportunities for joint planning. This working group built a strong foundation for trusted collaboration, and the existing working group or future iterations should continue to meet to implement the Plan.
- ◆ **Virginia and Kentucky Tourism boards and organizations (Dickenson County Tourism, Pike County Tourism, Virginia Tourism Corporation, and Kentucky Tourism)** - Promoting the Russell Fork Blueway and new amenities and access points is a critical component of increasing usage and awareness of the Russell Fork River. These regional promotion entities can present the Blueway as a tourism opportunity, increasing visitation to the river itself. However, these organizations are also critical for ensuring that the benefits of the Blueway extend outward into the communities along the river as part of a larger regional tourism development strategy through cross-promotion with destinations, services, and businesses to package complementary activities and amenities.

As noted above, site-level maintenance can and should be absorbed by existing managers. However, corridor-level coordination will require cohesive and unified programming, marketing, safety messaging updates, signage maintenance, and grant reporting. This requires a dedicated coordinating entity with staff capacity and ongoing funding. Potential models for the coordinating entity are outlined below:

### *Corridor Leadership and Coordination*

The blueway's most immediate need is dedicated facilitation leadership, technical capacity, and grant management support to carry the work forward between meetings. The working group structure is in place, but without a named facilitator responsible for setting agendas, tracking commitments, managing grant timelines, and building organizational capacity, momentum.

The working group should continue to meet at least quarterly to share updates, review grant applications, and support one another through letters of support and consistent communication. The steering committee established through this planning process should be activated as the corridor's strategic and funding guidance body. Further engagement with the river's broader user community, which was identified but not fully explored due to time constraints, can be reached through established channels including the Russell Fork River and Russell Fork Whitewater social media groups, Trout Unlimited, and Stream Sweepers.

Two paths for establishing long-term organizational leadership are worth pursuing. Reactivating Friends of the Russell Fork, the grassroots organization started by Gene Counts, a well-known area advocate who passed away in February 2026, would give the corridor a purpose-built local voice connected to an already organized user base. Alternatively, the corridor should explore alignment with an existing nonprofit whose mission already encompasses outdoor recreation or conservation in the region, one that can advocate for both Kentucky and Virginia stakeholders under a single organizational umbrella without duplicating capacity that already exists.

Next steps: a late summer alignment meeting to name a one-year term lead facilitator, confirm organizational direction, expand the steering committee, and establish the quarterly working group cadence.

## Long Term Management and Maintenance Strategy

Long-term maintenance funding should be built into initial grant requests wherever possible. A long-term management plan could help ensure the Blueway's long-term sustainability, clearly outlining long-term financing mechanisms, the parties responsible for the ownership and management of each access site, and any shared responsibilities, particularly between public and private partners.

Strategies for funding long-term management of the Blueway depend on the granting organization, but a few specific strategies are outlined below. These may be relevant for site-specific or corridor-level funding.

1. **ARC POWER Implementation** – ARC allows operational support within implementation grants for a defined period, so the corridor grant ask would benefit from including a maintenance reserve or endowment component.
2. **EDA Public Works** – if applicable for Elkhorn City infrastructure, EDA grants can include operations and maintenance provisions.
3. **Thompson Charitable and Ann and Gene Worrell Foundation** – both foundations have capacity-building and organizational development programs that could support the coordination entity in its early years.
4. **User fee revenue** – once outfitter services develop (Phase 2–3), a small per-trip or permit fee structure could generate a maintenance revenue stream. This would require enabling legislation or ordinance at the municipal or county level.

## Long Term Management and Maintenance Strategy

Long-term management of the Russell Fork should also consider how increased advertising, signage, updates to access points, and other changes are affecting visitation patterns. This is especially important to understand not only during peak visitation during the dam releases on October weekends but also throughout the year.

Monitoring visitor use can help ensure that natural resources, cultural resources, visitors, residents, and local economies are all receiving the benefits of a cohesive, thriving blueway. In addition to providing economic baseline information, trail or traffic counters can help monitor visitor use numbers and patterns over time. Periodic visitor surveys can provide qualitative information about where visitors are coming from and their experiences on the Russell Fork. These data can help land managers predict and adapt to changes in visitor use and make management decisions accordingly.

Long-term, if visitor numbers are causing negative impacts on resources or visitor experiences, visitor use management strategies can help address or prevent issues. Engineer, education and communication, and enforcement interventions can further support desired management outcomes. Additional VUM resources, [available here](#), can provide guidance around proactive, adaptive visitor use management opportunities.



# APPENDICES

**APPENDIX A: ECONOMIC IMPACT  
RESEARCH**

**APPENDIX B: COST ESTIMATES**

**APPENDIX C: SITE VISIT DEBRIEF**

# APPENDIX A: ECONOMIC IMPACT RESEARCH

# Russell Fork River Recreation Area

## Economic Impact Research

### Demographics<sup>1</sup>

	Dickenson County, VA (Census Tract 401)	Pike County, KY (Census Tract 9319)
Population	3,726	2,493
Population Density	51.8	53.5
White Population	94.4%	97.2%
Non-White Population	5.6% (two or more races)	1.5% (Black) 1.3% (two or more)
Individual Income	\$24,290	\$25,152
Educational Attainment		
Less than High School	15.5%	12.9%
High school	47.6%	44.1%
Some College	29.1%	22.5%
Bachelors	5.4%	13.2%
Graduate	2.5%	7.4%

### Labor Force Participation<sup>2</sup>

Dickenson County, VA	Pike County, KY	Appalachian Region Average	United States Average
54.4%	55.1%	74.5%	78.8%

### Current Tourism Economic Impact<sup>3</sup>

Metric	Dickenson County, VA (2024)	Pike County, KY (2024)
Direct Visitor Spending	<b>\$12.9M total</b>	<b>\$78.6M total</b>
Spending: Recreation	\$1.1M	Not disaggregated
Spending: Retail	\$4.3M	—
Spending: Food & Beverage	\$2.5M	—
Spending: Lodging	\$2.3M	—
Tourism Employment	137 jobs	646 jobs
Labor Income	\$3.2M	\$16.1M
State & Local Taxes	\$0.9M	\$8.6M
Year-over-Year Spending Change	-5% (2023-2024)	Not reported

<sup>1</sup> ACS, 2024

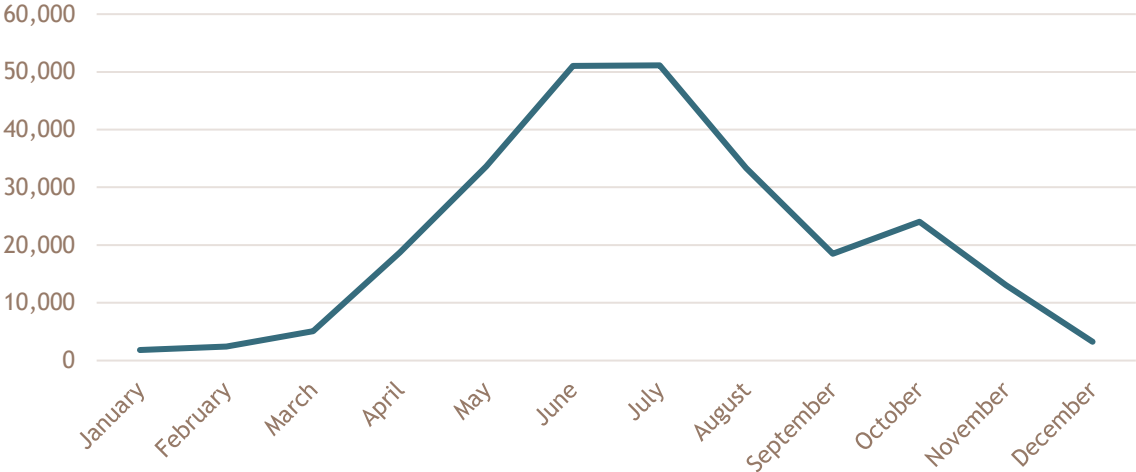
<sup>2</sup> Ages 25-64 2019-2023, Source: ARC

<sup>3</sup> Source: 2024 [Virginia Tourism Corporation](#); [Kentucky tourism data](#)

# Existing Visitors

- Visitation remains consistently high, exceeding 250,000 visitors annually in 2024.
- Even during downturns (e.g., 2021), the park maintained a substantial visitor base.
- In 2024, Breaks Interstate Park ranked as the 9th most visited state park in Virginia

**BREAKS INTERSTATE PARK, MONTHLY VISITATION (2024)**



	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
<b>Breaks Interstate Park</b>	324,578	310,583	192,039	205,788	196,401	256,053

## Comparison: Commercial River Use<sup>4</sup>

River	State	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Chattahoochee	GA	35,000	36,500	34,000	38,000	40,000
Chattooga	GA/SC	24,960	25,714	20,194	25,986	23,475
Nantahala	NC	131,052	121,064	111,610	136,611	115,997
Ocoee	TN	191,157	168,213	146,039	182,073	164,242
Pigeon	TN	185,376	187,784	199,385	257,589	213,426
Gauley	WV	22,556	19,845	24,588	25,390	20,990
New	WV	59,987	58,983	50,023	72,907	63,250
Shenandoah	WV	23,841	26,717	17,057	19,439	21,466

<sup>4</sup> [2022 Commercial River Use Report \(2018-2022 trends\)](#)

## Case Studies

### Economic Impacts of River Recreation (2014)<sup>5</sup>

Research on river recreation across the United States shows that whitewater paddling produces meaningful local economic benefits with relatively minimal infrastructure investment. Visitors spend money on lodging, food, fuel, and retail in nearby communities, often in rural areas that otherwise struggle to attract tourism. Because paddling activity can occur outside peak tourism seasons and does not require extensive built facilities, it represents a cost-effective economic development strategy. Nationally, outdoor recreation contributes hundreds of billions of dollars annually and supports hundreds of thousands of jobs, with paddling representing a meaningful share of that activity. Overall, the key takeaway is that river recreation provides a steady, distributed economic benefit that supports small businesses and reinforces the value of maintaining accessible, high-quality river corridors.

### Nantahala & Pisgah National Forests, NC (2017)<sup>6</sup>

A 2017 study found that noncommercial paddlers generate approximately \$3.2 million annually across seven rivers, supporting 35 jobs and \$827,000 in labor income in the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests. Commercial rafting activity, however, has a much larger economic footprint, with an estimated \$36 million in annual spending across three rivers, supporting roughly 446 jobs and \$10 million in job income. These findings highlight the importance of outfitter services and guided recreation in scaling economic impact. The region also demonstrates how a mature river recreation economy can anchor a broader outdoor industry cluster, including gear manufacturers and tourism-related businesses.

- Noncommercial paddlers:
  - \$3.2M annual spending (7 rivers)
  - Average trips often multi-day (~3 nights)
  - 35 jobs
  - \$827K labor income
- Commercial paddlers:
  - ~\$36M annual spending (3 rivers)
  - ~446 jobs
  - ~\$10M labor income

Commercial rafting drives 10x+ higher economic output than private paddling

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<sup>5</sup> [Economic Impacts of River Recreation \(2014\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Nantahala & Pisgah National Forests, NC \(2017\)](#)

## Run of River Whitewater Park, Skowhegan, ME (2016)<sup>7</sup>

The proposed Run of River whitewater park in Skowhegan illustrates the economic potential of a small-town, place-based investment. The project is estimated to generate approximately \$6 million in annual spending and about 50 jobs in its first year, with growth to \$19 million in annual spending and more than 170 jobs within ten years. Events and competitions are expected to play a major role in driving visitation, with individual events capable of generating up to \$1 million in economic impact. Beyond direct spending, the project is anticipated to catalyze downtown revitalization, increase property values, and stimulate new business development. This case demonstrates how even relatively small whitewater parks can serve as anchors for broader economic transformation.

### Year 1 Impacts

- ~\$6M in annual spending
- ~50 jobs
- ~\$1.5M labor income

### Year 10 Projections

- ~\$19M annual spending
- ~171 jobs

## Virginia State Parks Economic Impact (2024)<sup>8</sup>

At a statewide scale, the economic importance of outdoor recreation is even more pronounced. In 2024, visitors to Virginia’s state parks generated approximately \$352 million in direct spending, resulting in over \$531 million in total economic activity and \$382 million in net economic impact across the state.

Spending Category	Day Visitor			Overnight Visitor			
	Local Day Visitor	Non-Local Day Visitor	Non-Resident Day Visitor	Resident Cabin Guest	Resident Camping Guest	Non-Resident Cabin Guest	Non-Resident Camping Guest
Overall Per Visitor (\$)	\$22.17	\$64.27	\$78.68	\$89.17	\$45.94	\$94.32	\$54.24

<sup>7</sup> [Run of River Whitewater Park, Skowhegan, ME \(2016\)](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Virginia State Parks Economic Impact \(2024\)](#)

## Proposed Methodology

To estimate potential economic impacts, three development scenarios are defined based on increasing levels of river access, utilization, and destination appeal:

### Conservative Scenario:

Existing Breaks Interstate Park visitors who currently do not use the Russell Fork begin accessing the river. This scenario assumes no additional visitor growth, only a shift in behavior among current users.

### Moderate Scenario:

Improved river access and amenities drive modest new visitation growth (approximately 10-20%) above current Breaks attendance.

### Optimistic Scenario:

Coordinated whitewater destination marketing combined with access improvements attracts a specialized paddling market. This scenario assumes development of a visitation profile similar to established destinations such as the Gauley River at a comparable stage.

## Spending Assumptions and Benchmarks

### General Visitor Spending:

Use the Virginia State Parks 2024 Economic Impact Study as the primary benchmark to estimate per-visitor spending in the Dickenson County context.

### Whitewater-Specific Spending:

Use the Nantahala-Pisgah 2017 study to estimate spending associated with whitewater paddlers, adjusted to 2024 dollars using CPI.

## Leakage Points

Despite strong visitation to Breaks Interstate Park, there are significant areas where potential economic value is currently lost outside the Russell Fork corridor:

### Lodging

Dickenson and Pike County has extremely limited lodging inventory, forcing many visitors to stay in surrounding counties or regions.

### Food & Beverage

Limited restaurant options result in visitor spending being captured in larger nearby commercial centers rather than within the corridor.

## Outfitter Services

There are no established commercial outfitters operating on the Russell Fork Gorge, meaning:

- Visitors must bring their own equipment, or
- Travel to other rivers (e.g., Nantahala, New River) for guided experiences

## Retail / Gear

- There are no paddling or outdoor retail businesses within Dickenson County or Pike County, leading to additional leakage of recreation-related spending.

# APPENDIX B: COST ESTIMATES

# Haysi-Sandlick

		Quantity	Unit	Unit Cost	Total Cost
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Parking/ circulation upgrades</b>				
<b>1</b>	Demo existing paving	485.00	SY	\$15.00	\$7,275
<b>2</b>	Pedestrian gravel trail (5' wide 2" stone 4" thick)	62.00	SY	\$105.00	\$6,510
<b>3</b>	Vehicular asphalt surface 3" thickness, 8" abc*	485.00	SY	\$60.00	\$29,100
<b>4</b>	Striping	1.00	LS	\$800.00	\$800
<b>5</b>	Wheel stop	7.00	EA	\$210.00	\$1,470
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Concrete stair access</b>				
<b>6</b>	Concrete stair access	42.00	SY	\$1,224.00	\$51,408
<b>7</b>	Riprap	10.00	TON	\$40.00	\$400
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Bank clearing/ invasive control</b>				
<b>9</b>	Clearing and grubbing	0.20	AC	\$60,000.00	\$12,000
<b>10</b>	Live stakes	200	EA	\$7.00	\$1,400
<b>11</b>	Native plantings - plugs	200	EA	\$12.00	\$2,400
<b>12</b>	Permanent seed	0.20	AC	\$3,000.00	\$600
<b>13</b>	Native plantings - 10 gal. Trees	3	EA	\$320.00	\$960
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>All</b>				
<b>14</b>	Mobilization (mobilizing and demobilizing equipment)	1	LS	\$5,000.00	\$5,000
<b>15</b>	Staging area prep & removal	1	LS	\$4,500.00	\$4,500
<b>15</b>	Erosion control-temporary seed	0.2	AC	\$3,000.00	\$600
<b>16</b>	Reinforced silt fence	270	LF	\$6.25	\$1,688
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Site elements</b>				
<b>17</b>	Picnic tables	3	EA	\$1,200	\$3,600
<b>18</b>	Remote wifi and cell hotspot	1	EA	\$5,000	\$5,000
	<b>Cost estimate total</b>				<b>\$134,711</b>
	<b>Design and permitting</b>				
	Design and permitting (10% cost)	1	LS	\$13,471	\$13,471
	<b>Cost estimate total</b>				<b>\$148,182</b>

# Winding Road

		Quantity	Unit	Unit Cost	Total Cost
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Parking/ circulation upgrades</b>				
<b>1</b>	Remove gob pile	1.00	LS		\$0
<b>2</b>	Gravel parking pulloff (8" cab-420 sf)	48.00	SY	\$105.00	\$5,040
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Concrete stair access</b>				
<b>3</b>	Concrete stair access (12' long)	42.00	SY	\$1,224.00	\$51,408
<b>4</b>	Riprap	10.00	TON	\$40.00	\$400
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Bank clearing/ invasive control</b>				
<b>5</b>	Clearing and grubbing	0.20	AC	\$60,000.00	\$12,000
<b>6</b>	Live stakes	200	EA	\$7.00	\$1,400
<b>7</b>	Native plantings - plugs	200	EA	\$12.00	\$2,400
<b>8</b>	Permanent seed	0.20	AC	\$3,000.00	\$600
<b>9</b>	Native plantings - 10 gal. Trees	3	EA	\$320.00	\$960
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>All</b>				
<b>10</b>	Mobilization (mobilizing and demobilizing equipment)	1	LS	\$5,000.00	\$5,000
<b>11</b>	Staging area prep & removal	1	LS	\$4,500.00	\$4,500
<b>12</b>	Erosion control-temporary seed	0.2	AC	\$3,000.00	\$600
<b>13</b>	Reinforced silt fence	270	LF	\$6.25	\$1,688
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Site elements</b>				
<b>14</b>	Remote wifi and cell hotspot	1	EA	\$5,000	\$5,000
	<b>Cost estimate total</b>				<b>\$90,996</b>
	<b>Design and permitting</b>				
	Design and permitting (10% cost)	1	LS	\$9,100	\$9,100
	<b>Cost estimate total</b>				<b>\$100,095</b>

# Bartlick-Pound Confluence

		Quantity	Unit	Unit Cost	Total Cost
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Parking/ circulation upgrades</b>				
1	Trail Access Improvements (100 ft long - 8' wide gravel trail)	88.00	SY	\$135.00	\$11,880
2	Warning signage about portage ahead	1.00	EA	\$200.00	\$200
3	Road signage	1.00	EA	\$200.00	\$200
4	Remote wifi and cell hotspot	1	EA	\$5,000	\$5,000
	<b>Cost estimate total</b>				<b>\$17,280</b>
	<b>Design and permitting</b>				
	Design and permitting (10% cost)	1	LS	\$1,728	\$1,728
	<b>Cost estimate total</b>				<b>\$19,008</b>

# Bartlick Portage

		Quantity	Unit	Unit Cost	Total Cost
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Trail</b>				
1	Natural surface pedestrian trail (4' wide)	260.00	LF	\$20.00	\$5,200
2	Portage signage	1.00	EA	\$100.00	\$100
	<b>Cost estimate total</b>				<b>\$5,300</b>

# Skegg Hole

		Quantity	Unit	Unit Cost	Total Cost
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Trail</b>				
1	Natural surface pedestrian trail (4' wide) to designated put-in	250.00	LF	\$20.00	\$5,000
2	Bank fishing access point (boulder placement)	1.00	LS	\$1,000.00	\$1,000
3	Old Three C road improvements (grading and gravel)	1.00	LS	\$60,000.00	\$60,000
4	Install signage and wayfinding (2 directional signs)	2.00	EA	\$200.00	\$400
5	Remote wifi and cell hotspot	1	EA	\$5,000	\$5,000
	<b>Cost estimate total</b>				<b>\$71,400</b>

## Garden Hole

		Quantity	Unit	Unit Cost	Total Cost
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Road Upgrades</b>				
<b>1</b>	Vehicular asphalt surface 3" thickness, 8" cabcs*	3,000.00	SY	\$60.00	\$180,000
<b>2</b>	General drainage improvements	1.00	LS	\$20,000.00	\$20,000
<b>3</b>	Culvert replacement	1.00	EA	\$110,000.00	\$110,000
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Hardened Boat Access</b>				
<b>4</b>	Hardened boat access (concrete ramp 18' wide, 100' long)	200.00	SY	\$200.00	\$40,000
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>All</b>				
<b>5</b>	Mobilization (mobilizing and demobilizing equipment)	1	LS	\$20,000.00	\$20,000
<b>6</b>	Staging area prep & removal	1	LS	\$4,500.00	\$4,500
<b>7</b>	Erosion control-temporary seed	0.3	AC	\$3,000.00	\$900
<b>8</b>	Reinforced silt fence	100	LF	\$6.25	\$625
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Site Elements</b>				
<b>9</b>	Remote wifi and cell hotspot	1	EA	\$5,000	\$5,000
	<b>Cost estimate total</b>				<b>\$381,025</b>
	<b>Design and permitting</b>				
	Design and permitting (10% cost)	1	LS	\$38,103	\$38,103
	<b>Cost estimate total</b>				<b>\$419,128</b>

## Ratliff Hole

		Quantity	Unit	Unit Cost	Total Cost
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Trail</b>				
<b>1</b>	Remote wifi and cell hotspot	1	EA	\$5,000	\$5,000
	<b>Cost estimate total</b>				<b>\$5,000</b>

## Elkhorn City

		Quantity	Unit	Unit Cost	Total Cost
<b>ITEM</b>	<b>Trail</b>				
<b>1</b>	Remote wifi and cell hotspot	1	EA	\$5,000	\$5,000
	<b>Cost estimate total</b>				<b>\$5,000</b>

*Disclaimer: Equinox is furnishing this cost estimate as requested by the client. Please note that estimated costs are subject to change based on field conditions, local or regional differences, changes to the plans, and/ or changes in unit costs. Cost estimates are provided for use in budgeting, but in no way should this estimate be construed as a final cost for the project. Final costs are contingent on actual bids from contractors. Equinox will not be held responsible for differences between this cost estimate and bid costs.*

# APPENDIX C: SITE VISIT DEBRIEF

# Russell Fork River Recreation Area

## Working Group Meeting + Site Assessment | May 7-8, 2026

The Phase 2 working group was formally convened on May 7, 2026, at Breaks Interstate Park. The meeting brought together land managers, agency partners, tourism officials, and community leaders from Virginia and Kentucky under a unified project vision for the Russell Fork River corridor. It was the first time the full working group had been in one room, and it was followed the next day by a full-day field assessment of all seven proposed and existing access points.

The meeting was structured around three objectives: surface the site-specific knowledge that only the people who manage, use, and live alongside the river can provide; validate the access point framework developed in Phase 1; and establish shared ownership of the implementation work among the organizations that will ultimately build, maintain, and champion these access points.

### Partner Capacity Alignment

A central exercise of the May 7 meeting asked partners to self-identify into six functional working groups based on organizational capacity and individual expertise. Each group was defined by a clear mission statement and a list of the types of organizations best positioned to contribute. Partners wrote their names directly onto interactive boards mounted in the meeting room, creating a visible, voluntary record of commitment. The results of that exercise are captured below.

The Tourism Marketing and Storytelling group is responsible for promoting the corridor to paddlers, visitors, and media. This group's scope includes outreach to tourism agencies, marketing professionals, CVBs, media outlets, and outfitter networks. Partners who signed on include Sabrina Stanley, Jeff Hess of Heart of Appalachia, Daniel Flores and Ronnie Hylton of Breaks Interstate Park, and Austin Bradley.

The Land Management and Maintenance group is responsible for long-term stewardship of access points, trails, signage, and infrastructure along the corridor. This group draws from parks, state agencies, conservation organizations, municipalities, and volunteer trail crews. Partners who signed on include Daniel Flores, Ronnie Hylton, and Austin Bradley of Breaks Interstate Park, and Jacob Anderson. An additional contact at russellforckconsulting@gmail.com was noted.

The Grant Development and Funding Strategy group is responsible for identifying, applying for, and managing grant funding to implement blueway infrastructure and programs. This group is positioned to engage The Nature Conservancy, economic development agencies, tourism foundations, and ARC partners. Partners who signed

on include Dana Cronkhite of the Dickenson County IDA, Austin Bradley, Nathan Bryant (Mayor of Elkhorn City), Jacob Anderson, and Grandall Potter.

The Small Business and Hospitality Development group is responsible for supporting the growth of outfitters, guides, shuttle services, lodging, dining, and visitor services along the corridor. This group should draw from SBDCs, chambers, economic development offices, and existing business owners. Partners who signed on include Dana Cronkhite and Jeff Hess of Heart of Appalachia.

The Policy, Permitting, and Cross-State Coordination group is responsible for navigating multi-state regulations, easements, permitting requirements, and keeping partners aligned across the Kentucky and Virginia line. This group should include TNC, state agencies, elected offices, planning commissions, and legal or policy staff. Partners who signed on include Jeff Williams of Virginia DWR and Emily Watling of KDFWR.

The Project Management and Implementation group is responsible for coordinating construction, contractors, timelines, and ensuring the physical improvements are built correctly. This group should draw from parks, planning agencies, project management firms, and experienced construction leads. Grandall Potter of Utility Management signed on.

## Leadership Reception

The working group meeting was followed on the evening of May 7 by a leadership reception at Breaks Interstate Park that included members of the broader Cumberland-Pine Mountain Corridor steering committee, regional funders, and elected officials. The reception served as an opportunity to build cross-sector relationships and to introduce the Phase 2 work to partners whose involvement will be essential during the funding and implementation stages. Attendance included representatives from Thompson Charitable Foundation, the Dickenson County Board of Supervisors, the Towns of Haysi and Elkhorn City, the Big Sandy Development District, and the Cumberland Plateau Planning District Commission.

## Field Assessment

On May 8, the working group conducted a full-day field visit to all seven proposed and existing access points along the Russell Fork corridor from Haysi to Elkhorn City. The field assessment gave every partner the opportunity to stand at each site, observe conditions firsthand, and contribute observations that shaped the site assessment cards included in this plan.

At each stop, the group evaluated current access conditions, parking capacity, vegetation, slope, river entry points, safety considerations, and the relationship of

the site to the nearest community or road network. Partners with agency or institutional knowledge of specific sites, including DWR at Winding Road and Pound River Confluence, USFS at Skegg Hole, and Breaks Interstate Park at Garden Hole, provided context that no desktop analysis could replicate. Observations from the field assessment were incorporated directly into the site-by-site tear sheets and the phased implementation recommendations that follow in subsequent chapters.

The field assessment confirmed the Phase 1 framework while surfacing several site-specific adjustments. Road conditions at Garden Hole were found to be rougher than anticipated, with partners noting both the logistical challenge and the experiential value of the gravel access road. The Skegg Hole approach confirmed the need to address invasive Knotweed and clarify the private land crossing before infrastructure investment begins. The Thunder River Campground site in Haysi was confirmed as the most construction-ready location, with grading and initial improvements already underway. And at Elkhorn City Beach, the group confirmed city interest in formalizing the take-out below Time Out Pizza, with parcel ownership and city council engagement as the next steps.

The two days at Breaks Interstate Park produced the foundation for every recommendation in this document. What follows in the chapters ahead reflects not only the planning team's analysis, but the direct input of the partners who will carry this work forward.