

Missouri

2025 Impact Report



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17.8
trees preserved for the future



1,379.8
gallons of water not used



2,679.3
pounds of CO₂ prevented



It can be easy to think about The Nature Conservancy's work as, well, work. It is work, and it is extremely important that we do it well. TNC is taking on the complex challenges of biodiversity loss and climate impacts that are truly global in scale. That requires a serious, worldwide effort.

But nature rarely feels global in everyday life. I'll bet that the experiences that made you care about the wildlife, water and air around you are grounded in a far smaller scale—

maybe just a single hiking trail or even a single moment in the right place with the right people.

Those seemingly tiny corners of the landscape and fleeting bits of time stay with us in big ways. Among our staff, we have scientists, prescribed fire leaders, data gurus, aquatic engineers, HR experts and fundraising pros. For many, the path that brought them to TNC's mission began with kayaking, rock climbing, hiking, camping and birdwatching. You protect what you love.

The total amount of time I spend hunting, fishing and poking around the woods in search of mushrooms is a sliver of my annual calendar, but those experiences have such power. Just a few hours wading through a small stream with my father earlier this year was enough to revive decades-old memories. I was a boy when he first took me there, and though it is now me taking him, the magic of the water, woods and time together feels just the same.

I hope you have places like that, no matter where they are or when you last visited. They compel us to see our work at the statewide, region-wide and even global scale for what it truly is—not some unknowable vastness, but a collection of millions of fishing holes, farm fields at dusk, climbing trees, family campsites, birdhouses and, if I look closely, at least one small stream with the inexhaustible power to make memories.

Thank you for supporting TNC's work, both big and small.

Adam McLane
Missouri State Director



Bridges to Biodiversity

Protecting the Interior Highlands

By Luke Donovan, special to The Nature Conservancy

In the heart of the Ozarks, streams weave through woodlands of oak and pine, shaping the landscape and supporting a rich diversity of aquatic life. These waterways have flowed for millions of years, forming the backbone of the Interior Highlands region—a biologically significant area that spans southern Missouri, northern Arkansas and parts of Oklahoma.

These streams are home to hundreds of native species, from crayfish and mussels to darters and bass. But their ability to support healthy ecosystems depends on one critical factor: connectivity.

When small dams, low-water crossings, and other barriers disrupt the natural flow of water, they fragment habitats and limit the movement of aquatic species. That's why The Nature Conservancy is focused on identifying and removing these barriers—to restore stream connectivity and protect the resilience of these vital systems.

Restoring Stream Connectivity

TNC's review showed that the most disruptive types of infrastructure in the region are small dams and low-water crossings. These barriers interfere with the connectivity of the

region's waterways and put fish populations that are already vulnerable at even greater risk by impeding their ability to breed and find food as they swim upstream.

Though these barriers may look small enough to be harmless, even those that sit only an inch above the water's surface can severely disrupt the area's ecosystems. "While trout and salmon in western streams can swim and leap up waterfalls to reach their breeding ranges, many of our Ozark stream species, especially those that swim along the stream bed, are unable to overcome obstacles over a couple of inches," says Rob Hunt, director of resilient waters for TNC in Missouri. "These obstacles effectively shrink whole stream systems into five or 10-mile reaches to which these fish are constrained."

You may come across a low-water crossing and notice round pipes allowing water to pass through, seemingly allowing fish to pass safely and continue upstream. These pipes, known as culverts, can concentrate flow during high-water events, scouring the channel below. They can also quickly fill with sediment from upstream, causing water to pour over the driving surface and create deep pools on the downstream side of the crossing, creating a vertical obstacle for fish trying to move upstream.

“These obstacles effectively shrink whole stream systems into five or 10-mile reaches to which these fish are constrained.”

— Rob Hunt, Director of Resilient Waters

To address aquatic barriers across the Interior Highlands, TNC uses the National Aquatic Barrier Inventory and Prioritization Tool in collaboration with partners like the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and others. This tool helps identify where barriers remain, where they've been removed or replaced, and what impact they have on the environment. Efficiency is the name of the game in a region as vast as the Interior Highlands, and this tool helps TNC support the health of these ecosystems in a targeted and lasting way.

Alongside the use of smart technologies, collaboration in the region has proven to be crucial in maintaining consistent and widespread barrier removals. Because the region stretches into three different states, collaboration with other conservation organizations is essential. These partnerships allow more resources to be allocated toward safer fish passages, including critical support and funding to finance barrier replacements and removals.

Sherry Fischer, stream and watershed unit supervisor at MDC, is involved in overseeing funds which help to replace harmful barriers with bridges that allow waters to flow naturally beneath. “Most of these projects are really only possible through partnerships and collaboration because of their price tag,” she says. “Luckily, the Missouri Conservation Heritage Foundation’s Stream Stewardship Trust Fund, an in-lieu fee mitigation program, has been able to provide funding for many projects that reestablish connectivity for critical species.”

The Niangua Darter: A Symbol of Stream Health

The Niangua darter, a federally threatened and state-endangered fish found in only about eight streams running through the Ozarks, serves as an important indicator species for the health of the region’s waterways. They require high water quality to survive, so when barriers and culverts alter the morphology of streams, their fragile populations are put at risk.

Thanks to collaborative conservation efforts throughout the region, however, Niangua darters have become icons of the success of the work being done to remove and replace barriers. According to Craig Fuller, fisheries biologist at MDC, roughly 10 low-water crossings in the Little Niangua River Watershed were cutting off Niangua darter populations from critical habitat. Over a 10-year span, those barriers were replaced with bridges designed to restore natural stream flow and connectivity. The results were clear: previously, Niangua darters were found in only 50% of streams in the area, but soon they were showing up in more than 65% of streams. The species was recovering across the watershed.

It is clear that these projects help to support the health of aquatic life and ecosystems, but they are also vital in promoting more reliable infrastructure for the people in the region who depend on these low-water crossings for safe transportation. Many of these crossings in rural communities are no more than concrete slabs laid across the river’s foundation and are prone to degrading during



high waters and flood events. When these bridges are impassable or damaged, these communities may become cut off from emergency services, medical care and school bus routes. It's important to continue replacement and removal efforts across the region, not only for the well-being of its water systems, but for local communities.

"The most common road-related barriers to aquatic organisms are found in rural areas because these types of crossings are usually less expensive to construct," says Emily Moyer, resilient waters program manager at TNC in Oklahoma. "But, they often require more maintenance and have a shorter lifespan than fish-friendly bridges and box culverts. When these become barriers, the native stream morphology changes, which can become a battle against nature, causing more maintenance and shorter lifespans for crossings." TNC is working to change the norms of using past practices and to share new ideas about more effective solutions. "We hope to not only prioritize and remove current barriers, but look to find a new way of thinking," says Moyer. "We are partnering with other conservation groups, as well as a variety of road managers, including counties, Tribes, and the local department of transportation to accomplish our goals."

There's no easy path to barrier removal in the Interior Highlands, but TNC's persistence and partnerships help bring renewed hope to the region's waterways. Every single barrier that is removed or replaced strengthens the ecosystems and local communities by creating safer infrastructure, reconnecting habitat and restoring natural flow that allows these beautiful streams to run freely.





Rooted in Place

Missouri's Centers for Conservation Innovation in action

Just outside Columbia in Huntsdale, along a bend in the Missouri River, some bottomland row crop acreage is being shaped into something new.

The Nature Conservancy's Missouri River Center for Conservation Innovation (CCI) spans 164 acres and represents a unique partnership between TNC, the University of Missouri Center for Agroforestry and Missouri River Relief. Designed to be collaborative and multi-functional, the site is a demonstration farm, restoration project and outdoor classroom all in one.

The landscape is designed as an agroforestry training and demonstration site, with examples of flood-tolerant agroforestry practices. Currently, the site is shaped by two agroforestry systems. On the north side of the property, rows of pecan and walnut trees have been planted, offering a flood-tolerant model for integrating tree crops with traditional floodplain agriculture. Along the riverbank, a multi-functional riparian buffer made of native trees and shrubs protects against flood damage and provides wildlife habitat. These and other efforts have been supported through the EQIP program from the Natural Resources Conservation Services, which is a program that provides technical and financial assistance to landowners and farmers to promote sustainable land management practices.

The site also serves as a testing ground for research practices that could inform broader floodplain strategies. Soil assessments have been conducted by the Soil Health Assessment Center at the University of Missouri, and acoustic wildlife monitors are capturing soundscapes to monitor bird and bat activity.

Ron Revord, director for the Center for Agroforestry, has been involved since the early planning stages. "We've worked closely with TNC to design systems that are relevant to the goals and interests of mid-Missouri floodplain farmers and land managers," he says. "It's a rare opportunity to showcase farm-scale agroforestry in a bottomland setting."

That scale is a game changer. At the Center for Agroforestry's home farm in New Franklin, most research plots are an acre or less. But the large size of demonstrations at the Missouri River Center makes it easier for farmers and landowners to visualize agroforestry in practice and to work toward sustainable market opportunities that simultaneously conserve resources and produce nutritious local foods.

"It's hard to visualize a full farm system from a small research plot," Revord says. "Here, we can put nearly three decades of agroforestry science into action and show what it looks like to manage a productive, resilient 30-acre tree crop system."

The Center is also emerging as a key site for conservation education, and the nonprofit organization Missouri River Relief sees it as a transformative opportunity.

“Place matters, and this place sits in the heart of the floodplain,” says Jami Wade, executive director of Missouri River Relief. “It’s close enough to Columbia for easy access, yet it feels like a true field station where the river is the teacher. The Center offers a safe launch point for boats, room for groups to gather and the unique ability to connect classroom concepts to real river processes in a single visit.”

The partnership is already expanding Missouri River Relief’s impact. “Right now, the Center gives us a reliable place to gather, meet and plan, but the real impact is what this partnership makes possible next,” Wade says. “With TNC at the helm and a shared roadmap in motion, we can transition from occasional access to a true home base for river education.”

A Network of Innovation Across Missouri

The **Missouri River CCI** is part of a larger, statewide effort to rethink how conservation is practiced, shared and scaled. It is one of three Centers for Conservation Innovation established across Missouri by TNC.

Each CCI is tailored to its region’s unique ecology, conservation challenges, and partnerships, and is designed to advance four pillars: stewardship, research, training and outreach. Together, they form a statewide network where conservation is collaborative, place-based and scalable.

Grand River Grasslands CCI, located at Dunn Ranch Prairie in northwest Missouri, anchors conservation efforts in one of the

world’s most endangered ecosystems, the tallgrass prairie. The site includes nearly 1,000 acres of unplowed prairie and over 2,000 acres of restored grasslands, where bison roam and prairie-chickens dance. Stewardship practices include prescribed fire, native seed collection and sustainable grazing. The site now hosts acoustic wildlife monitors that capture wildlife soundscapes and is piloting beaver dam analog structures in collaboration with the Missouri Department of Conservation and the University of Missouri to support wetland restoration. Dunn Ranch also serves as a training ground for fire crews and student interns and welcomes thousands of visitors each year through events like Prairie Day.

Ozark Woodlands CCI, based at TNC’s Mill Creek property near Van Buren, showcases the biodiversity of the southeastern Ozarks. Surrounded by a fen, oak and pine woodlands, glades and riparian forests, the site is uniquely positioned near the Ozark National Scenic Riverways and benefits from strong partnerships with the Missouri Department of Conservation and other regional partners. Stewardship efforts include invasive species removal and prescribed burns, while research is centered around long-term forest ecology projects, such as the Missouri Ozark Forest Ecosystem Project. The center is poised to become a hub for training and collaborative stewardship across the Ozarks.

The work underway at Missouri’s CCIs is just the beginning. These centers are laying the foundation for a future where conservation is not only science driven and community led, but deeply rooted in partnerships and place, responsive to local needs and built to last.

Learn more at nature.org/missouricci





The River Remembers

The power of regenerative agriculture

The river remembers everything. It remembers the spring rains that rush through fields, carrying soil and nutrients downstream. It remembers the choices made on the land—what's planted, what's grazed, what's developed, what's left bare. And it remembers the consequences: the algae blooms, the “dead zones” in the Gulf, the floods and the fish that never return.

But The Nature Conservancy is working with farmers, ranchers and a wide range of partners to rewrite the river's story. One that begins with regeneration, resilience and hope. At the heart is TNC's regenerative agriculture program in Missouri, a strategy rooted in science, partnership and the belief that conservation must work for both people and nature.

A Landscape of Opportunity

Missouri is an agricultural powerhouse. With nearly 28 million acres devoted to farming, two-thirds of the state's land, it ranks among the top-producing states for corn, soybeans, beef cattle, rice, swine and poultry. More than 90% of these farms are family-owned, passed down through generations.

But this abundance comes with a cost. Missouri is the leading phosphorus contributor in the Mississippi River Basin, with the Grand River watershed in the northwest playing a significant role. Nutrient runoff from the land flows into rivers and streams, eventually feeding the hypoxic zone in the Gulf—a place where marine life struggles to survive.

“The scale of agriculture here is both our greatest challenge and our greatest opportunity,” says Kent Wamsley, TNC's grasslands and sustainable agriculture strategy manager in Missouri. “If we can help farmers adopt and implement practices that protect soil and water, we can make a real difference—not just locally, but nationally and globally.”



Stewarding the Land, Honoring the Past

That difference starts with the land and with the people who know it best.

Buck Hoeckelmann didn't expect to return to the farm his great-grandfather once owned. But when The Nature Conservancy acquired 206 acres in St. Charles County—just 40 miles northwest of St. Louis—from the Franciscan Sisters of Mary, the opportunity brought him back. A lifelong farmer and experienced contractor, Hoeckelmann was hired to help implement conservation practices on what is now Tributary Farm. For him, it was a full-circle moment.

"There's a good chance my great-grandfather built the original terraces on that farm," Hoeckelmann says. "Now I'm helping restore them. It's kind of like caring for the land he once worked."

Working alongside TNC staff, Hoeckelmann helped install a suite of regenerative practices designed to improve soil health, reduce erosion and protect water quality. These include terraces, grassed waterways and a two-stage ditch, which is a method that mimics natural stream systems to slow runoff and filter harmful nutrients before they reach nearby waterways.

"It's not something you see much around here," Hoeckelmann says of the two-stage ditch. "But it made sense for this site, and it's good to be part of something that might help other farmers see what's possible." Another addition to the property is a pollinator plot—an area planted with native vegetation that not only supports biodiversity but also helps slow water movement and reduce erosion on a steep hillside. "It's a smart use of land that wasn't being farmed," Hoeckelmann says. "And along with increased habitat, it's doing a lot of good for the soil and water."

On his own farm, Hoeckelmann has practiced no-till farming for more than 35 years and continues to look for ways to improve how his land handles rainfall and runoff. He understands that what happens in the field doesn't stay there. It flows downstream, affecting water quality in rivers and lakes.

"Everything we do on the land ends up in the water," he says. "If we can slow that down, keep the soil where it belongs and improve how the land handles rain, we're helping more than just our own farms."

His two sons, ages 25 and 27, farm alongside him, and his daughter-in-law works in agriculture as well. "I've worked with my dad my whole life," Hoeckelmann says. "Now I'm hoping to keep it going so my sons can take it over and continue on."

A Future Worth Growing

The work taking place at Tributary Farm is more than a local restoration effort—it's a model for what's possible across Missouri. By demonstrating how regenerative agriculture can improve soil health and water quality, TNC is helping farmers see the benefits of conservation practices before they implement them on their own land.

Many of these best-management conservation practices that reduce erosion and loss of nutrients are eligible for cost-share, a type of funding that helps farmers adopt conservation practices, from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Missouri's Soil and Water Conservation Districts. Missouri's Parks, Soils and Water Sales Tax supports state cost-share for farmers and will appear before Missouri voters for reapproval in 2026.

As extreme weather patterns, market pressures and population growth intensify, the stakes have never been higher. But through partnerships rooted in trust and shared purpose, TNC is building a roadmap for resilience—one that honors Missouri's farming heritage while embracing innovation.

"We're not just conserving land," Wamsley says. "We're cultivating a future where agriculture and conservation go hand in hand."

And the river? It will start to remember something new—cleaner water, healthier soil and the legacy of those who chose to protect it.

Mobilizing for Missouri's Landscapes

Habitat Strike Teams are scaling conservation through collaboration, trust and action

It's early August in the Grand River Grasslands when Julie Copley's phone rings. The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) needs help with an upcoming prescribed burn. Her team for the burn season isn't even staffed yet, but she's already coordinating support.

"That call came before we had our full crew," says Copley, who leads TNC's Habitat Strike Team in the region. "That's the kind of trust we've built with our partners."

The Grand River Grasslands team operates in a landscape of rare and beautiful tallgrass prairie region that spans 160,000 acres across Missouri and Iowa. Copley describes their work as "filling in the gaps" and connecting conservation efforts across boundaries. "We're not just working on preserves," she says. "We're helping landowners who have valuable sites but lack the resources, time or training to manage them."

That flexibility is a hallmark of Missouri's Habitat Strike Team model. Copley describes a typical day as having "four or five options" depending on weather, moisture and burn windows. Her team might start the morning surveying invasive species, spraying or working on equipment upkeep, all while staying ready to mobilize for a prescribed burn at a moment's notice.

Zoom out and you'll find two other Habitat Strike Teams operating across Missouri: in the Eastern Ozarks and Osage Plains. Each strike team includes a full-time coordinator and multiple seasonal crew members trained in prescribed fire and invasive species management. Together, they form a nimble, statewide network designed to scale conservation through collaboration.

"These teams aren't meant to be the be-all and end-all," says Ryan Gauger, TNC's fire and stewardship manager in Missouri. "They're here to help people get over hurdles they didn't think they could get over on their own."

That help often comes in the form of extra hands during time-sensitive burn windows. A single strike team can make the difference between one prescribed fire and two, freeing up agency



staff to cover more ground. "It's about supplementing in the right place at the right time to have a bigger outcome," Gauger says.

From MDC's perspective, Habitat Strike Teams add critical lift to complement the work already being done by state, federal and private partners.

"As a collective, working on public lands and with private landowners, we just can't affect enough acreage annually to keep up with vegetative succession and all the needs of our native species and natural communities," says Nate Muenks, MDC's natural resource planning section chief. "These teams allow us to tackle projects we wouldn't otherwise have the time or capacity to address."

From prairie restoration to wildfire risk reduction, TNC's Habitat Strike Teams are helping Missouri meet the moment. One call, one burn, one partnership at a time.

Learn more at nature.org/mostriketeams.



The Ripple Effect

Leveraging our lands

Explore any of the nearly 15,000 acres The Nature Conservancy owns, or the more than 100,000 acres we've helped protect, and you will find reasons for hope.

It could be a monarch hovering over a purple pop of milkweed, a baby bison bounding through tall grass or the gentle “sploosh” of a turtle slipping into an Ozark stream. Any of a million moments awakens us to the wonder alive across our network of more than 30 preserves.

Less obvious is their power to drive change far beyond their borders. TNC works at the scale needed to help people and nature thrive. We have global goals to protect 30% of the world's land and water by 2030 while reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 3 billion metric tons—nearly 10% of what scientists say is necessary to avoid the worst effects of a changing climate.

That kind of impact comes from aligning thousands of smaller efforts under big-picture priorities. In Missouri, we have developed six core strategies that contribute to global goals by caring for the unique landscapes and communities across our state: Land Protection, Reconnecting Rivers and Floodplains, Fire and Stewardship, Leveraging Our Lands, Regenerative Agriculture and Clean Energy Transition.

By working at the strategy level, our preserves become bigger than their acreage. They become hubs where strategies are carried out on the ground. They tie into other preserves and surrounding landscapes, giving wildlife room to adapt to and survive mounting challenges. They become places where partners can collaborate and kick the tires on sustainable practices that they and others take home to their farms and forests.

The generous support of donors who join us in thinking big allows TNC to create a ripple effect, spreading the most effective conservation practices. In recent years, we have added several new preserves, thanks to gifts from people and organizations who share our mission. Each is an opportunity to rebuild habitat on those sites, but more importantly, to build out those larger strategies, so that others can carry their lessons forward.

Wetland restoration and invasive species control on a 277-acre property recently acquired along the Little Blue River near Kansas City will improve habitat for birds and reduce harmful chemical runoff into the river. That's a victory for local wildlife and water quality, but it also contributes to our bigger freshwater goals. A gift from longtime supporter Susan Lordi Marker has been key to the budding transformation at that site.

Near St. Louis, improvements to a farm, now called Tributary Farm, donated by the Franciscan Sisters of Mary will reduce erosion and runoff while better serving pollinators and farmers. Like the Little Blue River site, it is part of our fast-growing regenerative agriculture strategy, which contributes to TNC's freshwater goals.

Though separated by more than 200 miles, the two sites are united and strengthened by common themes. They are grounded in conservation you can see and feel, creating models that broaden the horizon.



Top to bottom: Wetlands at Little Blue River naturally filter runoff and support pollinators, aquatic plants and wildlife.; Dennis Marker, TNC's Kent Wamsley, Susan Lordi Marker and David Marker at the Little Blue property. © Sunny Unnerstall/TNC

Missouri

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What better legacy is there to leave than your commitment to protecting nature for future generations? Whether you are taking the first steps toward planning your estate or are in the process of updating your estate plan, The Nature Conservancy is here to help.

Contact us today.

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