

Kentucky

2026 Impact Report

The Nature Conservancy







Natural Wisdom

Letter from the State Director

When writing an essay that touches on timely world events, it is wise to let the reader know when one is putting pen to paper. The pace of change and the magnitude of issues make it possible that what feels relevant on a sweltering September 2, 2026, might feel outdated by the time you read this around the holidays. I will risk it.

I will risk it because the state of our world is much on my mind of late. And so is the passing of a beloved Kentucky son and a national icon. Wendell Berry died two days ago at 92, and our world is a little darker with him gone.

Before going further, let me say that Wendell Berry offered more wisdom about the world and how to live in it with a few sparse lines of poetry than I have mustered in all my essays. Let me also be honest that The Nature Conservancy's approach is quite different from Wendell's. Berry wrote and spoke and lived how the world *should* be and inspired many others to embrace that same way of seeing and being in that world. He was unstinting, uncompromising and (kindly) authoritative. The Nature Conservancy works within the complexities of the world as it *is* to secure victories, both large and small, that move us toward a better one. We are flexible, collaborative, willing to negotiate and find common ground, often with elected officials, business leaders and others with whom we disagree on a range of other issues. I see these differences as complementary, not oppositional.

I am no Berry scholar. But I know one of his simple and profound teachings was that we should listen to the natural world. His reasons were lengthy, and many centered on what listening to nature can do for us—our sense of place, our sense of self, our sense of purpose. But perhaps most of all, Berry simply understood that the planet has something important to tell us. And lately it is shouting.

When I read stories of devastating floods in Nepal, record-breaking heatwaves and fires in Europe, and the megadrought in the western United States leaving vast stretches at their driest in the last 1,200 years, I cannot help but recall one of Berry's better-known quotes:

"Whether we and our politicians know it or not, Nature is party to all our deals and decisions, and she has more votes, a longer memory, and a sterner sense of justice than we do."

COVER: Kayaking along Fern Lake with Cumberland Gap in background © TNC; THIS PAGE TOP-BOTTOM: Kentucky River palisades viewed from Tom Dorman State Nature Preserve © TNC; Red eft stage of eastern newt, Appalachian Mountains © TNC

As we head toward 2027, my wish is that we listen more to people and the planet offering natural wisdom, and far less to machines purveying artificial intelligence.

I spend time reflecting on world events because what happens in the world impacts Kentucky. But it is also true that what we do in Kentucky matters to the world. As you will read in this 2026 Impact Report, our staff and partners have, once again, produced local results that matter far beyond our borders.

As The Nature Conservancy begins our next 50 years in Kentucky, we added a critical tract of forestland in the growing quilt of protected lands along the Cumberland and Pine Mountain corridor, utilized controlled burns to increase forest health across record acreage in the Appalachian Mountains, launched new efforts to restore floodplains in the lower Green River watershed, planted thousands of native trees to reforest former mine lands, invested in additional community solar projects and led efforts that secured $6 million for the Heritage Land Conservation Fund from the Kentucky General Assembly. In a year when the challenges facing our planet came into increasingly stark focus, our small but dedicated team walked fire lines, cleared invasives, inspected forests, made phone calls, shook hands, shared credit, built trust and delivered for the planet—and for all of us who call it home.

If you supported us this year, please consider this report both a thank you and testament to what you have helped us achieve. These are your results, too. Your generosity makes a huge difference, and I am grateful. So, too, are the salamanders, vireos, timber rattlesnakes, black bears, box turtles, coyotes, goldenrods, warblers, white oaks, ruffed grouse, bobcats, bloodroot, trilliums, elk, bats, butterflies, hickories, pawpaws, ground nesting bees, striped skunks, hummingbirds and thousands of other plants and animals that are the heartbeat of our world.

Looking back at this essay, I realize I've tried to cover a lot of ground. Without doubt, Berry would have said it better. And so I will conclude with another of his quotes.

> **"The care of the earth is our most ancient and most worthy and, after all, our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it, and to foster its renewal, is our only legitimate hope."**

Let Wendell's words be our guide for the year ahead.



David Phemister
Kentucky State Director



ABOVE: The Phemister family on a hike in Red River Gorge, New Year's Day 2026 © David Phemister

The Nature Conservancy in Kentucky

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David Phemister
State Director

Sean Bowers
Appalachians Conservation Forester

Bear Clifton
Director of Development

Richard Clausen
Mitigation Program Manager

Chris Garland
Appalachian Project Director

Lauren Gawthrop
Communications and Marketing Manager

Heather Jeffs
Director of External Affairs

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Zach Luttrell
Director of Agriculture, KY & TN

Ben Miles
Director of Protection

Chris Minor
Director of Land Management/Fire Manager, KY & TN

Shelly Morris
Director of Conservation

Jeri Payne
Operations Manager

Zach Pickett
Stewardship Coordinator

Betty Sallengs
Associate Director of Development

Tyler Sanderson
Floodplain Conservation Manager

Michael Vasquez
Burn Boss, KY & TN

Holly West
Protection Associate

Protecting a Connected Future for Our Forests

In 2023, The Nature Conservancy set a goal of protecting 90,000 acres of land in key conservation corridors in Kentucky by 2030. In 2026, we added more than 2,000 acres toward that goal, bringing the total protected acres to 58,069. Conserving these lands strengthens one of North America's most important natural landscapes by protecting habitat, safeguarding water quality, expanding public access and supporting climate resilience.

Securing a key link in the landscape

This spring, TNC completed a major milestone with the permanent conservation of the 1,732-acre Thacker property in Bell County. Located between Cumberland Forest and Mountain River Farms, the Thacker property secures a critical connection in a growing conservation corridor across the Cumberland-Pine Mountain region of the Central Appalachians, one of the world's most biologically diverse and climate-resilient forest systems.

TNC's acquisition prevented the loss of these habitats through subdivision and development. Prior to TNC's involvement, the Thacker tract was headed toward a court-mandated auction that could have divided it into as many as 20 parcels.

"We all know that the Appalachians in Kentucky are a beautiful part of our state, but they are also biologically significant on a global scale, so we are very excited to be part of conserving important properties that will yield benefits to the people of Kentucky for generations," says Ben Miles, TNC's Director of Protection for Kentucky.

The Thacker property provides habitat for elk, black bears, bats, deer, ruffed grouse, wild turkey and many other species that depend on large, healthy forests. Just as importantly, its position linking existing conservation lands preserves a vital wildlife migration corridor. As the climate changes, connected forests will be increasingly crucial for helping wildlife and plant species adapt and move across the landscape.

The purchase of the Thacker property builds on the successful conservation of the neighboring 1,075-acre Mountain River Farms property, which TNC transferred to the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR) at the end of 2025. Together with protection and ongoing restoration of the adjacent 55,000-acre Kentucky portion of Cumberland Forest, these projects demonstrate the power of long-term partnerships.

Putting conservation into action

Today, the Cumberland Forest, Mountain River Farms and Thacker properties present opportunities to expand landscape-scale ecological restoration and stewardship. Already, TNC and our partners are improving habitat for elk and other wildlife, conducting prescribed burns, removing invasive species, restoring previously mined lands and increasing public access for outdoor recreation.

"Quality conservation and land management are rarely done alone," reflects Ben Robinson, Wildlife Division Director for KDFWR. "It takes strong partnerships to move the needle, and the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources couldn't be more pleased with the partnership we share with TNC. We continue to work together to identify key properties in east Kentucky that will benefit wildlife, hunters, anglers and outdoor enthusiasts."

Conservation of the Thacker property expands opportunities to create and maintain a diverse mix of forest conditions, including early successional and young forest habitats, which offer sunlit spaces rich in food and cover for critical species such as ruffed grouse, American woodcock and a variety of songbirds. Unfortunately, these young forests have become increasingly rare across the Appalachians.

Safeguarding healthy forests and streams

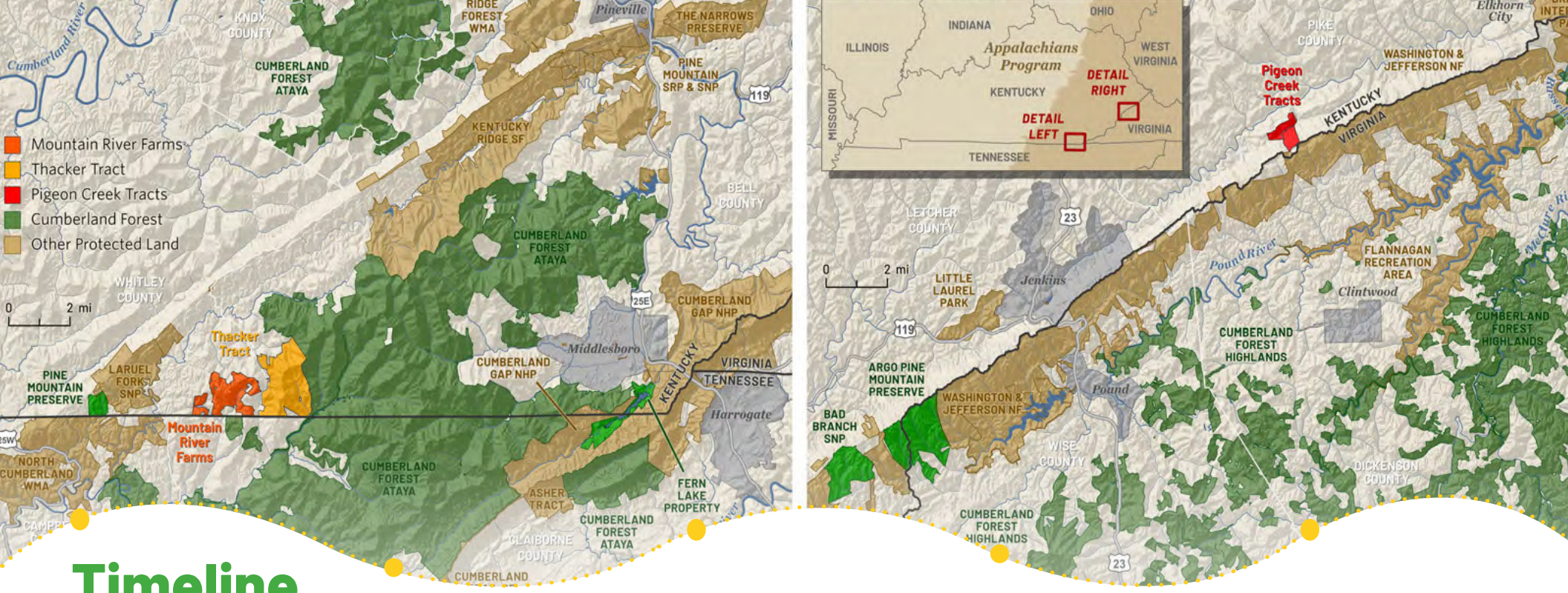
This year, TNC's Kentucky chapter also expanded our conservation impact at the northern end of Pine Mountain through the acquisition of two additional properties in Pike County. Known the Pigeon Creek tracts, these properties total more than 400 acres and lie adjacent to the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests and near Virginia's section of the Cumberland Forest.

The acquisitions also support our commitment to clean water protection, as they border Lower Pigeon Creek, an Outstanding State Resource Water recognized for its exceptional quality, and contain other streams that flow into Elkhorn Creek, home to the federally threatened Big Sandy crayfish.

While most of these streams are high quality, some could benefit from restoration to address historic logging impacts. TNC hopes to begin that work soon, improving water quality, strengthening aquatic habitat and enhancing long-term ecological value.

"The Pigeon Creek tracts are rare examples of properties in this part of Appalachia that have not been impacted by mining or oil/gas extraction. The importance of preserving these relatively unimpacted properties that are connected to larger protected areas can't be overstated. The combination of both intact forest and high-quality streams promotes the resilience of the globally important Appalachian corridor," explains Richard Clausen, Mitigation Program Manager for TNC in Kentucky.

Together, these accomplishments reflect a conservation strategy that goes beyond acres protected. By connecting conservation lands, restoring natural systems and protecting waterways, TNC and its partners are building a more resilient future for people and nature across Appalachia.



Timeline

2019
TNC launches the Cumberland Forest Project on 253,000 acres in Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia

2023
TNC and the Conservation Fund acquire 712-acre Fern Lake property; KDFWR acquires 54,540-acre easement on Cumberland Forest

May and December 2025
TNC acquires 1,075-acre Mountain River Farms property and then transfers to KDFWR

April 2026
TNC acquires 370 acres at Pigeon Creek on Pine Mountain

June 2026
TNC secures protection of 1,732-acre Thacker property









LEFT–RIGHT: Ridgelines visible from the Cumberland Forest Project lands; Black-eyed Susans bloom on recovered minelands in the Appalachians; Dense forestland on the Thacker property; TNC's Zach Pickett assessing bat habitat on the Pigeon Creek tract; All photos © TNC

Burning for Biodiversity

Kentucky celebrates a record prescribed fire season

For generations, fire has been a natural part of Kentucky's Appalachian landscape. Sparked by lightning or intentionally used by Indigenous peoples to steward the land, periodic fire helped shape open woodlands filled with native grasses, wildflowers, oaks, hickories and yellow pines. Today, prescribed fire is helping to restore those habitats while reducing wildfire risk and improving the health of forests across the region.

Each year, Kentucky's prescribed fire seasons occur primarily from October through December, and again from February through April. During these critical windows, The Nature Conservancy expands its fire management capacity by bringing on seasonal and on-call staff who work alongside full-time employees to carry out this important conservation work. These teams collaborate closely with partners, including the USDA Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, the Kentucky Division of Forestry, the Office of Kentucky Nature Preserves and the Kentucky Prescribed Fire Council to implement prescribed burns throughout the Appalachians in Kentucky.

This work requires careful planning, expertise and patience. Prescribed burns can only be conducted when weather and atmospheric conditions align, ensuring they meet management objectives while minimizing impacts to nearby communities and natural resources.

Expanding our reach

A generous private donation at the beginning of 2026 made a major expansion of TNC's prescribed fire program possible, supporting additional staffing, equipment and operational capacity. That increased investment, combined with strong partnerships across the region, enabled TNC to bring controlled burns to more acres than ever before this year.

The benefits of prescribed fire extend far beyond the burn itself. One of the primary goals is reducing hazardous fuels, including leaf litter and small woody debris that accumulate on the forest floor. By reducing this combustible material, prescribed fire can help lessen the intensity and impacts of wildfires that may occur in the area over the next three to five years.

Just as importantly, prescribed fire helps restore biodiversity. Much of Kentucky's Appalachian forest is now characterized by dense, closed canopies that block sunlight from reaching the ground. Historically, many ridge tops and south-facing slopes were more open woodlands where sunlight supported a rich understory of native grasses and wildflowers. Those habitats provided space for a wide variety of plants and animals, including species that have become increasingly uncommon.

Prescribed burning helps slowly recreate those conditions by reducing non-fire-tolerant species such as beech, maple and white pine, allowing more fire-adapted species like oaks, hickories and shortleaf pines to thrive, restoring the ecological diversity that once defined these forests.

Although prescribed fire is not a standalone solution, it is one of the most effective landscape-scale tools available for forest restoration. Combined with complementary practices such as selective logging, mastication—also known as forestry mulching or shredding—and targeted herbicide treatments, it allows conservation partners to make significant progress toward restoring unique woodland ecosystems across Appalachia.

"Prescribed burns are necessary for restoration and maintenance of open woodlands, providing space and resources for species of greatest conservation need while also reducing fuels available for wildfire," explains Chris Minor, TNC's Director of Land Management and Fire Manager for Kentucky and Tennessee.

The benefits are also felt when wildfire risk is high.

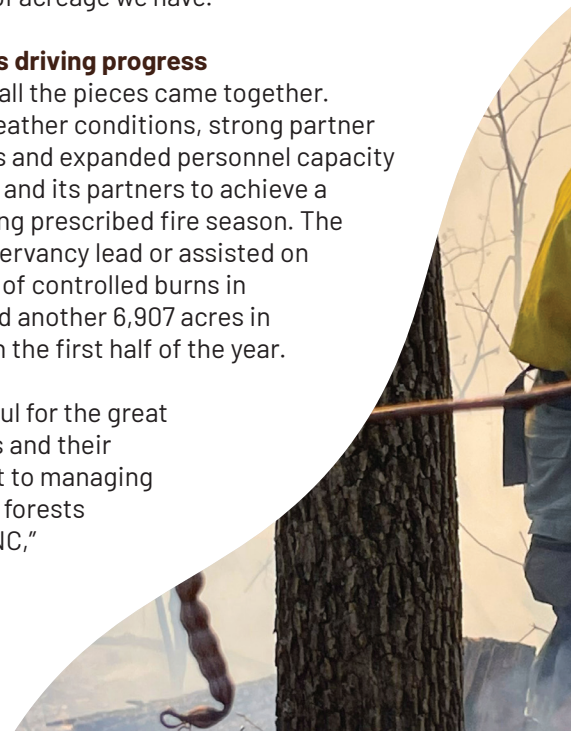
"The benefit of doing a prescribed fire during a bad wildfire season is that once a space has been burned, we've created a firebreak," says Merle Hacker, a regional wildlife biologist with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources who has worked on burns with TNC. "It's also saving some of the desirable tree species that would surely die in a wildfire situation versus a prescribed fire conducted under specific parameters."

"We're trying every year to increase acreage, eliminate invasive species, promote better habitat and reduce the risk of wildfire," Hacker adds. "I think The Nature Conservancy is a big reason why we're able to impact the amount of acreage we have."

Partnerships driving progress

Last spring, all the pieces came together. Favorable weather conditions, strong partner relationships and expanded personnel capacity allowed TNC and its partners to achieve a record-setting prescribed fire season. The Nature Conservancy lead or assisted on 31,760 acres of controlled burns in Kentucky and another 6,907 acres in Tennessee in the first half of the year.

We're thankful for the great partnerships and their commitment to managing Appalachian forests alongside TNC," says Minor.









31,760

Acres of prescribed burns within Kentucky's Appalachians landscape during the spring 2026 season



TNC crews plan and conduct prescribed burns throughout Kentucky and the Appalachians. Top left: © Mike Wilkinson, All others © TNC







From Floodplains to Flyways

Building a stronger future on Kentucky's Green River

Established in 2019, the Green River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) may be one of America's newest refuges, but it's already becoming an important example of collaborative conservation. Located where the Green and Ohio rivers meet, the Refuge provides critical habitat for migratory birds along the Mississippi Flyway. In addition to wildlife, it's also a vital lifeline for people who live near it, making water quality and floodplain health top concerns.

Where farming and habitat restoration meet

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has been working in partnership with two local farmers who are renting portions of the Green River NWR's Foster Farms tract, a 1,300-acre section hugging the banks of the Green River in an area that's prone to flooding. With the help of TNC, Friends of the Green River NWR and Ducks Unlimited, USFWS has developed a collaborative approach with the farmers that includes adding water-control infrastructure that will manage water levels on more than 40% of the refuge's largest tract.

This approach allows farming and conservation to coexist harmoniously, as the land remains in agricultural production while the habitat restoration continues. The farmers have agreed to leave 30% of their crops in the field for the benefit of native wildlife and have contributed equipment and operator time for the installation of the water control infrastructure, including pipes and gates that will manage water entering and exiting the property. TNC also plans to help USFWS retrofit a failing drainage system in the fields, knowing that better water management creates and protects the seasonal habitat conditions that benefit migratory birds, shorebirds and waterfowl.

"This project shows what can happen when landowners, farmers, conservation organizations and the Refuge work toward a shared goal. Together, we're creating the flexibility to manage food and water for wildlife while maintaining productive agricultural land," explains Tyler Sanderson, Floodplains Conservation Manager for TNC in Kentucky.

Building a blueprint for the entire watershed

While the Green River NWR represents just a small but important portion of the river system, significant work is progressing in other areas, as well. This year, TNC commissioned a study of the lower Green River, a watershed that spans 180 miles of the river's main stem. The study included community listening sessions, an initial meeting with representatives of more than 25 partner organizations, mapping of nutrient loads, an assessment of the floodplain function, and a plan that prioritizes areas to tackle first based on the greatest conservation impact. A similar analysis of the lower Ohio River watershed, covering 230 stream miles, is expected to be completed in January.

"These reports will help us determine next steps and target areas for our conservation work, ensuring our investment in these areas has the maximum positive

LEFT AND RIGHT ABOVE: Overlooking the Green River NWR; CENTER: TNC's Tyler Sanderson meets with partners from Friends of the Green River NWR and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. All photos © Fauna Creative



impact for the habitats and communities who rely on these waterways," says Sanderson.

TNC's focus on the Green River is strategic. It is one of the most biologically diverse freshwater ecosystems in the United States. A tributary of the Ohio River which then merges with the Mississippi, the country's largest artery for freshwater, the Green is a prime location for wetland and floodplain restoration that will have far-reaching impacts. Its floodplains, specifically, can store water during floods and improve water quality before it flows into larger rivers. Functional and healthy floodplains also provide habitat for fish, birds and countless other species.

What begins with one refuge tract can inform conservation across an entire river network. By combining on-the-ground restoration, community partnerships and science-based planning, TNC is helping to create healthier floodplains, cleaner water and better habitat for both wildlife and people across western Kentucky and beyond.

Explore our work and research along the Lower Green at nature.org/greenriver.



Safe Passage

Creating connections for water, wildlife and communities in Eastern Kentucky

On the other side of Kentucky in the Daniel Boone National Forest (DBNF), TNC is just beginning work to remediate road stream crossings, restore stream connectivity and improve aquatic community resilience with better transportation infrastructure.

Working with the Office of Kentucky Nature Preserves to assess and prioritize 122 crossings, TNC has identified 31 projects within DBNF where this work would be especially beneficial to habitat for native species—including a few that are federally listed as endangered or threatened—as well as people living, working and recreating in the region.

Across the landscape, many culverts—which carry small creeks and streams underneath roadways—are undersized or in various stages of disrepair, creating a barrier for aquatic species while also contributing to flooding and road impacts. In many cases, when you improve a culvert, you help reconnect a stream and improve road conditions, creating a win for both nature and people.

With flash flooding being an increasing concern, right-sizing culverts to allow for the natural and steady egress of water will make these passages safer and easier to travel, with transportation in the region more resilient and wildlife connectivity more accessible, especially for aquatic species.

Through a mix of federal and private dollars, TNC anticipates hiring a staff member to manage these projects, with guidance and support from the USDA Forest Service. In-the-field work is expected to begin in summer 2027.

"Road stream crossings are abundant, especially in eastern Kentucky, given the topography and number of streams, and unfortunately many of these crossings create barriers for aquatic life. It's death by a thousand cuts, creating many smaller disconnected stream segments," explains Shelly Morris, Kentucky's Director of Conservation for TNC. "This work will reconnect miles of stream habitat for native fish and mussel species and make for more resilient transportation for local communities."

ABOVE: Staff fom TNC and a variety of state, federal and private partners during a barrier assessment training in Spring 2026 © TNC





Investing in Kentucky's Natural Legacy

The Nature Conservancy helped score a major conservation victory in 2026 by leading advocacy efforts that secured a $6 million appropriation from the Kentucky General Assembly for the Kentucky Heritage Land Conservation Fund (KHLCF), tripling the state's previous investment. Working alongside a coalition of partners, TNC engaged policymakers throughout the legislative session to demonstrate how conservation strengthens Kentucky's economy, supports outdoor recreation, protects communities from flooding and safeguards the natural resources on which future generations will depend.

Since 1990, KHLCF has helped protect more than 95,000 acres across 70 Kentucky counties, preserving forests, farmlands, waterways and wildlife habitat throughout the Commonwealth. Yet funding for the program has not kept pace with growing conservation needs. The increased investment approved this year represents an important commitment to Kentucky's natural heritage and provides critical resources to support future land protection efforts.

TNC also helped advance the conversation around long-term conservation funding through House Bill 723, legislation introduced during the 2026 session that would have dedicated a portion of existing sales tax revenue from hunting, fishing and other outdoor sporting good sales to conservation. While the bill was not enacted, its introduction marked meaningful progress toward sustainable funding solutions. Together, these accomplishments reflect growing recognition that investing in nature is an investment in Kentucky's economy, communities and future.

Nurturing Forests and Families

The Nature Conservancy and the American Forest Foundation continued to grow the Family Forest Carbon Program (FFCP) in 2026, creating new opportunities for Kentucky landowners to benefit from conservation while strengthening the state's forested landscape. Since launching in 2024, the program has enrolled 149 landowners and more than 20,000 acres of forestland across Kentucky.

Through 20-year stewardship agreements, participating landowners receive forest management support and new income opportunities tied to increasing carbon storage. By helping family forest owners keep their lands healthy, productive and connected, the program is supporting wildlife habitat, strengthening climate resilience and ensuring Kentucky's forests remain a valuable resource for generations to come.

20,000 acres

Family Forest Carbon Project Kentucky enrollment

149 landowners

TOP-BOTTOM: a hiker explores TNC's Mantle Rock Nature Preserve. © Mike Wilkinson; Jim Woodring drives through a clearing on his land, which is enrolled in the FFCP. © Woodring Family



TNC's and Office of Kentucky Nature Preserves' Bad Branch State Nature Preserve on Pine Mountain in Letcher County

Photo credit © Devan King / TNC







Recharging Communities Through Clean Energy

The Nature Conservancy continued to turn conservation investments into lasting community benefits in 2026 through the Cumberland Forest Community Fund. In partnership with Mountain Association, we completed our third and fourth community solar projects in 2025 and launched a fifth installation in 2026. These projects help local governments and community organizations lower operating costs through renewable energy, freeing up resources that can be redirected to the people and services that matter most. By reinvesting royalties generated through the Cumberland Forest Project back into local communities, we are creating benefits that extend well beyond conservation.

2025's solar installations were completed at Knox County Economic Opportunity Council's (KCEOC) Community Action Partnership headquarters and Red Bird Mission School, joining previous projects at the Middlesboro Community Center and Leslie County Animal Shelter. The impact is already being felt. At KCEOC, dramatically reduced utility costs are helping to support programs for individuals experiencing homelessness and families facing financial hardship. At Red Bird, the expanded solar system is expected to reduce power costs by approximately 25%, allowing more resources to remain focused on education and community services while also creating opportunities to incorporate renewable energy into STEM learning programs. Each project demonstrates how investments in clean energy can strengthen organizations that have served eastern Kentucky communities for generations.

Momentum continues to build. In 2026, TNC and Mountain Association completed work on a new solar installation for Lend-A-Hand, a Knox County nonprofit whose programs include a community food pantry. The system is expected to generate nearly twice the organization's annual electricity needs and save an estimated $7,400 each year, funds that can be reinvested directly into services for local residents. With a sixth project already being explored, the Cumberland Forest Community Fund continues to show how conservation can deliver meaningful local benefits. For donors and partners, these projects represent a powerful example of how strategic investments can lower costs, strengthen community organizations and expand access to clean energy.

Advancing a Vision for Mammoth Cave's Future

As Mammoth Cave National Park welcomed hundreds of thousands of visitors this year, a long-term conservation vision for the park moved closer to reality. Federal legislation was introduced that would expand the park boundary, and it gained significant momentum in Congress. The proposed Mammoth Cave National Park Boundary Adjustment Act, sponsored by Senator Mitch McConnell and Congressman Brett Guthrie, would adjust the boundary of the park and enable the National Park Service to acquire 551 acres currently owned and stewarded by The Nature Conservancy. While the legislation has not yet passed, advancing through a congressional hearing marked an important milestone in a years-long effort to secure permanent protection in this globally significant landscape.

TNC first acquired a conservation easement on land near the park in 2017 and later purchased the land outright through a partnership focused on protecting habitat for endangered bats. Since then, we have managed the property using conservation practices

TOP-BOTTOM: The latest solar install at Lend-A-Hand © Johnathan Gambrel of Solar Energy Living; the array at KCEOC © Mike Wilkinson; aerial view of the panels atop Red Bird Mission School © Mike Wilkinson

designed to safeguard its exceptional natural resources. The land contains important cave entrances, rare wildlife habitat and cultural resources tied to both prehistoric peoples and Kentucky's early history. From the outset, our goal has been clear: protect these resources and create a pathway for their eventual stewardship by the National Park Service.

This year's progress reflects the power of strategic conservation partnerships and sustained donor investment. If approved, the transfer would strengthen protection of critical cave and watershed resources while supporting recreation, tourism and local economic development in the communities surrounding Mammoth Cave National Park. The act is much more than a boundary adjustment. It is an opportunity to ensure that one of the world's most extraordinary cave systems remains protected for future generations, while demonstrating how collaborative conservation can create lasting benefits for local communities.

Partners in Planting

In 2026, The Nature Conservancy celebrated five years of partnership with Green Forests Work and Suntory Global Spirits to restore forests on former mine lands in eastern Kentucky. Together, we planted 87,500 trees across 125 acres this spring, bringing the partnership's five-year total to more than 376,000 trees planted across 540 acres. These restoration efforts are transforming previously mined landscapes into future forests that will provide wildlife habitat, store carbon, improve water quality and support healthier Appalachian ecosystems for decades to come.





TOP: Suntory employees during the spring 2026 tree planting event; BOTTOM: the former mineland site prepped for planting
© Green Forests Work







Together, we find a way.

TNC staff members lead donors on a tour of the Cumberland Forest Project lands and Fern Lake, May 2026. All photos © TNC







Board Member Highlight

Keeling "Keo" Brown

For Keeling "Keo" Brown, conservation has always been connected to family.

Keo spent his earliest years in Kentucky before his family moved to Colorado when he was five. Growing up there meant spending time outdoors and developing an appreciation for wild places, often through experiences with his family and The Nature Conservancy. Those early experiences helped shape an understanding that the places we love do not remain that way by accident. Protecting them takes people willing to invest their time, resources and leadership.

Today, Keo finds himself back where his story began. He and his wife, Holly, have made Louisville home, and their family recently grew with the arrival of their daughter, Lucy. They also share their home with their dog, Perry. Returning to Kentucky and now raising a family here has given Keo a renewed appreciation for the Commonwealth's natural beauty and an even more personal reason to think about what we leave for the next generation.

"I think becoming a parent naturally makes you think differently about the future," Keo says. "There are places and experiences that meant something to me growing up, and I want Lucy and her generation to have those opportunities, too."

Keo joined The Nature Conservancy in Kentucky's Board of Trustees in the summer of 2025 and serves on its Development Committee. He has quickly embraced one of the most important roles a trustee can play: helping more people discover their own connection to conservation.

It is a role that fits him. Keo values relationships and believes that introducing someone to TNC's work, whether through a conversation or an outdoor experience, can be more powerful than simply explaining why conservation matters.

Professionally, Keo is Senior Manager of Finance & Strategy on the Jack Daniel's team at Brown-Forman, bringing a background in finance, strategy and leadership to his board service.

But for Keo, serving TNC is ultimately much more personal. It connects the Kentucky of his childhood and the conservation ethic his family helped instill in him with the Kentucky where he and Holly are now raising a family.

While Keo is part of an emerging generation of younger conservation leaders, he is already thinking about the next generation. "Like all kids, Lucy deserves to inherit places worth knowing, exploring and loving," says Keo. We wholeheartedly agree.

ABOVE: © The Brown Family

The Nature Conservancy in Kentucky

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Leave a lasting legacy for Kentucky's future

Love Kentucky's wild and beautiful places? Consider making them part of your legacy. By including The Nature Conservancy Kentucky in your estate plans, you can help protect the forests, rivers and landscapes you care about long into the future.

Legacy Club members are passionate supporters who want to use their estate assets to make a real difference for nature. Whether through a will, trust, retirement account or another planned gift, there are multiple ways to include TNC in your estate plans. You may be able to save on taxes, receive income for life or enjoy other financial benefits, all while protecting nature well into the future. Join the Legacy Club and help ensure that future generations can enjoy Kentucky's natural wonders just as we do today.

To see if a legacy gift is right for you, please contact Director of Development Bear Clifton at bear.clifton@tnc.org.

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