

July 2024



**MOUNTAIN  
WATERSHED  
ASSOCIATION**  
*Protecting, preserving, and restoring*

S U M M E R N E W S L E T T E R



# A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Mountain Watershed Association's 30th year has been off to a powerful start.

We've preserved water quality in the Indian Creek Gorge through the acquisition of an additional 55.7 acres in the Rasler Run subwatershed, bringing our total contiguous conserved acreage to nearly 242. On this property, our team is developing a treatment plan to save 19 acres of hemlock trees from the invasive woolly adelgid.

We've protected the watershed and health of residents for generations, particularly through our advocacy efforts which encouraged Fayette County Commissioners to adopt an ordinance restricting the development of oil and gas wastewater injection wells. Now, Fayette County residents do not need to worry if radioactive pollutants will be disposed of underground in their backyards.

We've educated hundreds of youth and adults on the importance of being stewards of the watershed we love. Meanwhile, thousands of residents have recreated on sections of trail we've restored, particularly the new Steyer Bridge section of the Indian Creek Valley Trail.

As you read about all we've accomplished so far this year, I want to thank you for your ongoing support. Here's to continued success as we celebrate three decades of protecting, preserving, and restoring the Yough.



**Ashley Funk**  
Executive Director

## THE NUMBERS SO FAR

# 6,687

**People who have accessed the Steyer Bridge section on the Indian Creek Valley Trail since trail improvements were completed.**

# 3,700

**Emissions-free miles MWA staff have traveled in the Ford Lightning electric truck, donated by the Limbach Family Fund in early 2024.**

# 150

**Property owners in the proposed Rustic Ridge expansion zone MWA organizers met during a recent door-knocking campaign to distribute information.**

# 450

**We've engaged over 450 people in education programs so far this year.**

# 55.7

**Additional acres purchased to expand the conserved property along Rasler Run, a tributary to Indian Creek.**



# ABOUT MWA

**MOUNTAIN WATERSHED ASSOCIATION IS A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION WITH THE MISSION TO PROTECT, PRESERVE, AND RESTORE THE YOUGHIOGHENY RIVER WATERSHED AND ITS BROADER COMMUNITIES.**

Our organization is unique in that we pursue on-the-ground restoration of historic environmental damages while we advocate to protect the watershed from new sources of pollution, primarily caused by fossil fuel development. MWA aims to empower communities, both locally and downstream, to transition towards sustainable, resilient, equitable economies, and healthy environments where all beings can thrive.

## OUR HISTORY

Like many grassroots groups, Mountain Watershed Association began its life around a kitchen table. The organization was founded in 1994 to oppose an underground coal mine proposal in the Indian Creek watershed. MWA's input and organized opposition resulted in the denial of the permit. Since then, the organization has expanded to 16 full-time employees, a 20-person volunteer Board of Directors, and more than 2500 members and supporters.

## SNAPSHOTS OF THE WATERSHED

*We're always looking to feature our supporters' photos in the annual Lottery Calendar as well as presentations, newsletters, and educational materials.*



**Do you have any photos taken in the Youghiogheny River watershed that you'd like to share with us? Email [Colleen@mtwatershed.com](mailto:Colleen@mtwatershed.com)**

# MEET THE TEAM



**Ashley Funk**  
Executive Director



**Alicia Jade Martin**  
Director of Operations



**Hannah Spencer**  
Program Development  
Manager



**Carla Ruddock**  
Director of  
Conservation



**Taylor Robbins**  
Conservation &  
Recreation Manager



**Melissa Marshall**  
Senior Legal  
Advocate



**Madison Hinkle**  
Community  
Advocate



**Eric Harder**  
Youghiogheny  
Riverkeeper



**Stacey Magda**  
Managing Community  
Organizer



**Chantelle Hutchens**  
Community Organizer



**Em Hough**  
Community Organizer



**Lindsey Waugaman**  
Education &  
Outreach Coordinator



**Colleen O'Neil**  
Communications  
Specialist



**Keith Tierney**  
Trail & Field Specialist



**Sarah Anthony**  
Conservation Fellow



**Aidan Kane**  
Summer AmeriCorps  
Member



**Carlee Shreve**  
Summer AmeriCorps  
Member

## *Thank you, James!*

Our beloved community organizer, James Cato, is moving on to pursue his MFA in creative writing at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, one of the most prestigious writing programs in the country! We wish him the best of luck in this new chapter of his career!



# CONSERVATION

*Guided by comprehensive restoration plans, we focus our conservation efforts on initiatives such as abandoned mine drainage remediation, water quality monitoring, trail development, and education.*

## YOUGH HELLBENDERS REMAIN ELUSIVE



*Summer AmeriCorps member, Aidan Kane, tosses a hellbender trap into the Youghiogheny River.*

Mountain Watershed Association and the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy teamed up again this spring to search for the eastern hellbender salamander in the waters of the Youghiogheny River. Last year, WPC conducted a traditional “flip-and-turn” survey in which rocks are carefully moved to find the salamanders underneath. But the Yough is notoriously deep and fast-flowing, so the team only found one using the flip-and-turn method.

This year, WPC tried a new survey method, with hopes of finding more animals. To attract the big salamanders, WPC staff built 25 non-invasive wire traps and baited them with creek chub. (Similar traps have been used to study hellbenders successfully in other states.)

With the help of MWA staff, the researchers placed the traps at five locations in the river, where people reported seeing hellbenders in the past. The traps remained in the water over two 24-hour periods. They were checked and re-baited twice, then removed from the river on the last day.

Our team didn’t find any hellbenders in the river during this short, three-day survey period. Nonetheless, WPC staff remain optimistic that these sneaky salamanders will show up eventually! The Yough is a prime habitat, with lots of boulders to provide shelter and plenty of prey for the long-lived hellbender to hunt.

## EXPANDING MACROINVERTEBRATE STUDIES

Aquatic and riparian habitats are among the most endangered ecosystems, facing threats from many pollution sources. To protect and restore our waterways, it’s important to measure and evaluate the condition of the organisms that call them home.

That’s why we collect and catalog aquatic macroinvertebrates (insects that spend part of their life in the water). Our original studies were focused on the Indian Creek watershed, but this year we’ve expanded our macro studies to the greater Youghiogheny River watershed to capture more information on its health and biodiversity.



*Keith and Sarah gather stream bugs in Indian Creek.*

## RASLER RUN STEWARDSHIP PLAN DEVELOPS



*Keith surveys Rasler Run for aquatic macroinvertebrates.*

Last year, MWA conserved nearly 200 acres of land along Rasler Run, a tributary to Indian Creek. This spring, we added 55.7 adjacent acres to this property, a purchase made possible by the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy's Colcom Foundation Revolving Loan Fund for Local Land Trusts and a grant from the Richard King Mellon Foundation.

Rasler Run is designated as a high quality coldwater fishery and Class A Wild Trout Stream. Part of the conserved property is also a Natural Heritage Area for its exceptional ecological diversity.

Our vision is to conserve this area's high ecological diversity, while also welcoming the community for recreational activities such as fishing, hiking, and primitive camping. To bring this vision to life, MWA first has to conduct biological surveys, develop a management plan for the property and prepare accessible recreational areas.

On a preliminary survey, our conservation team noted a thick stand of hemlock trees growing along the stream. One of our main concerns is the presence of the invasive and destructive hemlock woolly adelgid.

The hemlock woolly adelgid (*Adelges tsugae*) is a serious threat to our state tree, the eastern hemlock, in Pennsylvania and across the United States. This non-native, invasive insect has caused significant hemlock defoliation and mortality in Pennsylvania forests. To combat the adelgid, we are currently researching treatment methods that will help Rasler's hemlock stand thrive.



*Hemlock trees have dense boughs that shade headwater streams and control water temperature in the warmer months. Fragile species like brook trout need cool, clean water to survive.*

When completed, the project will not only benefit the local community but also Pennsylvania at large. We will preserve the water quality of Rasler Run, one of the few Class A Wild Trout Fisheries in the state, and also provide another terrific place for people to recreate in the Youghiogheny River watershed.

Previously, there was restricted access to fishing in Rasler Run because the majority of the land bordering the creek is privately owned. In the next few years, we hope to improve access and designate recreational areas on the property so the community can finally enjoy Rasler Run!



# RECREATION

*We work to enhance and promote recreational activities and environmental stewardship in the Youghiogheny River watershed.*

## TRAIL TUESDAYS BUILD COMMUNITY



At 6:30 pm every Tuesday since May, MWA has led a series of walks along the Indian Creek Valley Trail. These relaxed group walks ranged from 1-3 miles, sometimes featuring a special guest or guide along the way.

We've had a regular group of folks join us on Trail Tuesday walks this year. Walkers have enjoyed getting some outdoor exercise, spending time with their neighbors, and learning about the trail and the landscape around it.

Our last few walks are coming up, so join us for a stroll this month! You can

see the full schedule of trail walks by visiting [mtwatershed.com/events](https://mtwatershed.com/events)

## THE BEST ICV TRAIL GOLF SCRAMBLE YET!



**\$12,936**

Dollars raised for the Indian Creek Valley Trail Gorge washout at this year's Golf Scramble!

This year's Indian Creek Valley Trail Golf Scramble, held on June 7, had the best turnout ever, with 21 teams participating! Excellent weather and great conditions on the course at Donegal Highlands Golf Course made it a perfect day!

This year, the funds raised at the Golf Scramble will go toward repairing the large washout in the Indian Creek Valley Trail that occurred after a storm in 2021.

The event wouldn't have been possible without the help of our dedicated volunteers, trail committee, staff members, and generous sponsors! Their help has brought us one huge step closer to repairing the gorge washout! Keep an eye on our social media for updates on the repair process!

# EDUCATION

*Our goal is to build a sense of wonder about nature by inviting everyone to explore and appreciate wildlife, water, and the world around us. For more info about these programs, email [Lindsey@mtwatershed.com](mailto:Lindsey@mtwatershed.com).*

## MWA RECEIVES \$30,000 FOR EDUCATION



*Lindsey teaches a summer camp about aquatic macroinvertebrates.*

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection has awarded MWA a grant to continue expanding our outdoor education programs in the Youghioghny River watershed!

Over the past 30 years, we've provided educational activities at local events, visited classrooms, and implemented workshops. With the 2024 grant, we'll be able to support our education team in traveling to schools, educating at libraries and community centers, engaging Scout groups, and providing quality environmental programming to the community!



## INDIAN CREEK WATERSHED FESTIVAL

This year's Watershed Festival will be on September 28, 2024, at CW Resh Park in Indian Head. This fun community day features free fishing for kids, food, educational games and crafts, and the famous Indian Creek duck race. We hope to see you there!

***We're seeking sponsors for this year's Indian Creek Watershed Festival! If you would like to sponsor or get involved, contact Lindsey at [lindsey@mtwatershed.com](mailto:lindsey@mtwatershed.com)!***

## FISHING, PADDLING, HIKING, & MORE AT SECOND ANNUAL FAMILY FIELD DAY!



On June 15, MWA held the second annual Family Field Day at Laurel Hill State Park! Over 100 people (both locals and visitors) enjoyed a free day of paddling, fishing, crafts, and outdoor education with MWA staff and volunteers.

This wonderful education event is funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection Education Grant and the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission R3 Grant.



# CAMPAIGNS

*We empower communities in the broader Youghiogheny River watershed to engage in campaigns to address environmental degradation, climate change, and its root causes.*

## FAYETTE CO. RESTRICTS INJECTION WELLS

On March 21, Fayette County Commissioners voted unanimously to protect the health and welfare of Fayette County residents by restricting oil and gas wastewater injection well development. While the ordinance is not a total ban on injection wells, it is progress toward heavy restrictions on their development.

This move comes after G2 STEM, LLC submitted an application for an injection well in Nicholson Township last July. MWA and other like-minded groups organized with Nicholson Township community members, township supervisors, Fayette County Commissioners, and State Rep. Charity Grimm Krupa (R-Fayette) to submit their concerns about the well to the US EPA.

**125,755** Number of Fayette County residents protected from the new development of dangerous oil and gas wastewater injection wells.

Issues raised included heavy metals, carcinogenic, man-made chemicals, and radioactive materials present in fracking wastewater, quality of life impacts, and the likelihood of water contamination in public and private water supplies.

After the draft amendment was tabled at a meeting in January, MWA managing organizer, Stacey Magda, suggested increasing the setback distance from 500 feet to 2,500 feet. The suggestion was heard, and the approved zoning language includes that increased distance.

"This is not only a critical step toward protecting Fayette County from injection wells, but one hundred percent the result of local advocacy from residents passionate about their community," said James Cato, Regional Organizer with MWA.

## WESTMORELAND PUBLIC WATER WIN!



*Beaver Run Reservoir in Westmoreland County, which dropped to very low levels in 2023.*

Last year's drought watch in Westmoreland County caused residents, water authority officials, and businesses to take a closer look at their water use when Beaver Run Reservoir dropped lower than usual.

Nonprofit groups Protect PT, Three Rivers Waterkeeper, and MWA looked into numbers and found that, while MAWC asked residential customers to conserve water, it did not pause the withdrawal of millions of gallons of water for fracking until four months later, in November.

Together, these groups mobilized the community by hosting several meetings about water use. We argued (and MAWC agreed!) that fracking corporations should pay more per gallon for the water they consume. Now the price has nearly doubled! MAWC increased the cost for 1000 gallons of water from \$5.37 to \$9.40 for fracking companies, a change that went into effect in April.

# COAL MINING

*Given the tendency for mining to harm our communities and environment, we advocate to prevent coal mining developments in our watershed.*

## DEP REJECTS PETITION TO PROTECT THE LAUREL HIGHLANDS; MWA APPEALS



**11,000**

Acres MWA seeks to protect by filing an Unsuitable for Mining petition.

On March 22, 2024, MWA filed a lawsuit challenging the Department of Environmental Protection’s rejection of our “Unsuitable for Mining” Petition, which could protect 11,000 acres of Laurel Highlands from surface mining.

After reviewing the Petition, DEP deemed the petition “frivolous,” claiming the petition only listed impacts from underground mining and not surface mining, as is required. However, the standards also allow for the DEP to consider impacts from surface activities connected with underground mining. MWA included a lengthy hydrogeology report, which repeatedly referred to these types of impacts, such as the pumping, treating, and discharging of mine water into Jacobs Creek.

MWA’s hydrogeology report found that surface impacts are likely to result in roughly doubling the flow rate of water in tributaries to Jacobs Creek. Such an extreme increase can lead to permanent destruction of fish and other aquatic habitats.

The appeal of the Department’s determination will be heard by the Environmental Hearing Board, a Pennsylvania entity established to review final actions taken by the DEP.

## APPLY FOR DIRECT SUPPORT FUNDING!

The Direct Support Fund is a grants program hosted by MWA that focuses on providing resources to grassroots groups and advocates working toward social change on shale gas, coal, petrochemical development, and more. In 2023, we disbursed \$169,089 to environmental groups across Appalachia! Learn more by scanning the QR code, or visit [mtwatershed.com/direct-support-fund](https://mtwatershed.com/direct-support-fund)





# HAZARDOUS WASTE

MWA works alongside communities directly affected by the pollution discharge, poor air quality, and health impacts caused by hazardous waste landfills.

## MWA, COMMUNITY SPEAK OUT ON EPA CONSENT ORDER TO YUKON LANDFILL



MWA held a press conference to address EPA's Consent Order on a hazardous waste landfill in Yukon, PA, a town along a tributary to the Yough.

On April 19, the Environmental Protection Agency filed a Consent Order on MAX Environmental Technologies, Inc., allowing its Yukon facility to continue operations in a limited capacity.

This landfill stands out as the only facility in Pennsylvania that is permitted to treat and dispose of hazardous waste from commercial and industrial sources.

However, MAX's Yukon landfill has a long history of violations and is in serious disrepair, according to EPA's March 2023 NEIC Civil Investigation and December 2023 Notice of Violations.

***"The legacy of issues at MAX Environmental are a forever stain on the Yukon area. This should have been an opportunity for our regulators to get it right for the first time in the history of this facility, by permanently shutting the site down."***

*-Stacey Magda, MWA managing community organizer*



This spring, MWA installed warning signs near MAX Environmental's wastewater discharge point.

Along with restricted operations, the order includes an expert evaluation of its current operations, increased oversight by the EPA and DEP, and a requirement for MAX to make improvements to the facility. But the Yukon community and MWA think the order should go further to protect the community and the environment.

MWA held a press conference in Yukon near the landfill, where residents expressed their concerns and frustrations with the EPA order. Want to add your voice? Sign onto our petition to the EPA: [tinyurl.com/CLOSE-MAX](https://www.tinyurl.com/CLOSE-MAX)

# DEFEND THE YOUGH!

*MWA works alongside communities directly affected by the pollution discharge, poor air quality, and health impacts of hazardous waste landfills.*



*MWA staff shows off their strength at the spring river cleanup on the Yough River near West Newton.*

## 193 TIRES REMOVED FROM THE YOUGH!

At our springtime river cleanup on the Yough in West Newton, a crew of 30 volunteers pulled 193 old tires out of the river!

Although ubiquitous in our daily life, tires are full of toxic compounds. They contain aluminum, cadmium, chromium, copper, iron, magnesium, manganese, molybdenum, selenium, and sulfur, as well as a high level of zinc. Tires also contain plasticizers and accelerators. In addition, tires also contain a chemical called 6PPD, which is particularly deadly to aquatic life. As tires break down over the years, these toxic substances leach out, contaminating the river.

We're working to get as many toxic tires out of the Yough as we can – one river cleanup at a time!



## MWA COLLABORATES WITH PURPLE LIZARD ON WESTERN MARYLAND MAP

MWA and Purple Lizard Maps is collaborating on a new map of the Deep Creek Lake and Western Maryland area! This map will offer insight on the headwaters area of the Youghiogheny River watershed, which is famous for whitewater recreation, camping and hiking, rare native plants and animals, and scenic beauty!

# GET INVOLVED!

We're so thankful for volunteers who help with activities such as community organizing, water sampling, litter cleanups, fundraising, and trail maintenance!

## VOLUNTEER



## BECOME A TRAIL STEWARD

"Adopt" a section of the Indian Creek Valley Trail! Walk or bike your adopted section once a month to report potential issues and pick up litter along the way. Your updates will be brought to the Trail Committee each month. Email [Taylor@mtwatershed.com](mailto:Taylor@mtwatershed.com) to become a Trail Steward!

## ATTEND A RIVER CLEAN-UP

We float down the river, pulling tires and trash out of the water as we go. Bring your own boat, or borrow one of ours! *See the event schedule on the next page for dates.*

## JOIN A ROADSIDE CLEANUP

Much of the pollution in rivers comes from trash that washes down from the road. We organize seasonal roadside cleanups near our office in Melcroft to stop this trash from flowing downstream!

***Learn how to get involved:***  
**[mtwatershed.com/volunteer](https://mtwatershed.com/volunteer)**

## JOIN A COMMITTEE

*All meetings are held in-person at the MWA office and virtually.*

**Deep Mine Committee:** Second to last Thursday of every month at 6:30 pm.  
Contact [Stacey@mtwatershed.com](mailto:Stacey@mtwatershed.com)

**Fundraising Committee:** Second Wednesday of every month at 9:30 am.  
Contact [Hannah@mtwatershed.com](mailto:Hannah@mtwatershed.com)

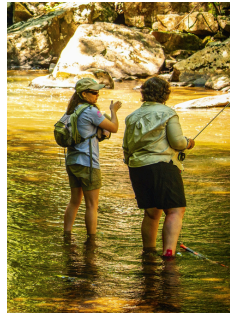
**Indian Creek Valley Trail Committee:** Third Monday of each month at 6:30 pm.  
Contact [Taylor@mtwatershed.com](mailto:Taylor@mtwatershed.com)

**Land Conservation Committee:** Second Monday bi-monthly at 7:00 pm.  
Contact [Taylor@mtwatershed.com](mailto:Taylor@mtwatershed.com)

**Watershed Festival Committee:** First Monday of every month at 9:00 am, Apr to Oct.  
Contact [Lindsey@mtwatershed.com](mailto:Lindsey@mtwatershed.com)



# UPCOMING EVENTS



**July 13:** Guided Hike at Twin Lakes Park with Protect PT

**July 28:** Yough River Float Trip hosted by Hazelbaker's

**August 24:** HeART of the Highlands: Intro to Forest Bathing

**September 14:** West Newton River Cleanup hosted by Bloom Brew

**September 28:** Indian Creek Watershed Festival, CW Resh Park

**October 9:** Yough River Convergence, Location TBA

**October 12:** Creepy Crawlies, CW Resh Memorial Park

**October 13:** HeART of the Highlands: Piano Recital

**October 16:** Member Appreciation Party, Bear Rocks Club

**November 2:** All About Plastic Pollution, McKeesport Regional History and Heritage Center

**November 21:** Yough Defense Party, Falls City Pub



## HEART OF THE LAUREL HIGHLANDS

*This series consists of two private, nature-themed events featuring talented local artists. Support a good cause, enjoy live music, deepen your ties to nature, and connect with good company. Donations support the Rustic Ridge Legal Defense Fund.*

**Trail Tuesdays:** Weekly group walks on sections of the Indian Creek Valley Trail. Every Tuesday in the summer at 6:30 pm!



*RSVP for these events and more!*  
**[mtwatershed.com/events](http://mtwatershed.com/events)**

# OUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS

*Our board of directors is made up of dedicated volunteers who share our vision for a cleaner, healthier Youghiogheny River watershed.*

Jerry Gearhart, Co-President  
Mary Lou Kuhns, Co-President  
Paige Dix, Co-Vice President  
Roger Pritts, Co-Vice President  
Kurt Limbach, Co-Secretary  
Stephanie Novak, Co-Secretary  
Kelly Kruper, Executive Board Member  
Jeri Lowe, Executive Board Member

Cathy Anderson  
Mike Cordaro  
Michael Dezort  
Kate (K.D) Ferrari  
Ken Gfroerer  
Peggy Mansberry  
Shelley Meyers  
Sarah Rowe

Faith Sartori  
Barbara Shaffer  
Rob Walters  
Emma Wolff

## DONATE TO DEFEND

*Join the effort to protect, preserve, and restore the Youghiogheny River watershed!*

NAME

---

ADDRESS

---

---

PHONE

---

EMAIL

---

\$10  \$25  \$50

\$100  \$250

**BECOME A MAJOR DONOR**

\$500  \$1,000

\$1,500  \$2,000

**Interested in a monthly donation?**

Scan the QR code to  
access our online  
donation page or visit  
[www.mtwatershed.com](http://www.mtwatershed.com)



*I would like my donation to support:*

**Legal Defense Fund (Rustic Ridge)**

**Land Preservation Fund**

**Indian Creek Valley Trail Fund**

**General Fund (Membership)**

**You can make a donation or renew your membership on our website OR mail a check to: Mountain Watershed Association | PO Box 408 Melcroft, PA 15462**

*If needed, the official registration and financial information of the Mountain Watershed Association, Inc. may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll free, in Pennsylvania, 1 (800) 732-0999*



**1414-B I C V Road**  
**PO Box 408**  
**Melcroft, PA 15462**

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
Melcroft, PA  
Permit No. 002