

A Long Time Coming: WVLT and Partners Permanently Protect Land on Big Sandy Creek

During the last 30 years, a mix of conservation groups and other stakeholders have contributed toward protecting land in the Cheat Canyon and along Big Sandy Creek in Preston County: The Conservation Fund, the Nature Conservancy, Friends of the Cheat, the West Virginia Land Trust, the West Virginia Outdoor Heritage Conservation Fund, the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, and more. The area is habitat for the endangered flat-spined three-toothed land snail, which lives nowhere else in the world. The rivers’ habitats support unique “flood scour” plant communities and at-risk bat populations, and, after years of addressing acid mine pollution, both the Cheat River and Big Sandy Creek support healthy fish populations. Oh yeah—and these areas have the best swimming holes in northern West Virginia!

When Waterfront Development Group announced plans in 2020 to develop private building lots, conservation groups began discussing ways to ensure river access for whitewater paddlers and potentially conserve a portion of the property for public access. Charlie Walbridge and former whitewater outfitter owner Dave Hough were instrumental in discussions with Waterfront Development Group that led to an opportunity to protect 4.25 miles of the Lower Big Sandy, which included the “put-in” access (starting point) and portage routes along the major rapids, including Wonder Falls. The West Virginia Division of Natural Resources already protected the remainder of the “river left” side of the Lower Big Sandy as part of the Cheat Canyon Wildlife Management Area (in 2014), and the “take out” (ending point) was secure as part of the West Virginia Land Trust’s Jenkinsburg Recreation and Natural Area (protected in 2020 and 2022). In other words, there was an opportunity to create a protected corridor on the entire “river left” side of the Lower Big Sandy—but someone needed to find the money and move swiftly to close the deal.

In late 2023 and early 2024, Walbridge quickly helped fundraise from individuals within his paddlers’ network, and worked with American Whitewater, a national nonprofit dedicated to the preservation and protection of whitewater rivers, to purchase and hold the Big Sandy property until we are able to bring it into our ownership at the West Virginia Land Trust during the coming year. The Land Trust will assure permanent public access to the Lower Big Sandy and explore additional opportunities for trails that may allow the public to enjoy sections of the river—places like Wonder Falls, which people have been visiting for years.

“This Big Sandy effort was about as grassroots as it gets,” said Brent Bailey, executive director of the West Virginia Land Trust. “This project hinged on that ‘community’ that Charlie talks about—those people who love their rivers and will take big and immediate steps to protect them into the future. This was an impressive effort, and we are grateful to be part of this story.”



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On The Cover:
Aerial of Big Sandy Creek

Executive Director's Report

In these turbulent and polarized times, count on this: Thanks to our supporters, we're still here, expanding the state's permanently protected landscape, and growing public support for conservation.

Regardless of political affiliation, our supporters all agree that clean drinking water, cleaner air, wildlife habitat, and recreational opportunities – all deriving from conserved lands, especially forested ones – are important for quality of life, and play a role in creating livable communities.

And it appears that almost everyone agrees that our private nonprofit niche as a conservation organization offers great opportunities for citizen engagement in creating these desirable community outcomes. So many supporters are showing up to answer the question, "If we don't protect it... who will?!"

From Boy Scout service projects to public celebrations of special places to crowdfunding appeals to secure amazing landscapes, you'll see in these pages a range of citizen actions with the WV Land Trust that is accelerating conservation momentum in the Mountain State.

See our article about the Big Sandy acquisition, an iconic paddling destination in northern West Virginia. It showcases how a revered leader marshaled a group of about 40 dedicated whitewater enthusiasts (many from out of state) to raise \$400,000 to purchase a property that protects this stunningly beautiful wild river, and created a partnership for the Land Trust with American Whitewater, a national nonprofit advocacy group.

Or reflect on the legacy of our friend the late Mark Mueller, whose bequest to us is humbling, and also a point of pride: Mark's gift speaks to the "Trust" in our name, and his confidence that we would be the vehicle to further his passion for the WV highlands.

Trust weaves its way through all of our projects: People are entrusting WVLT to protect and steward beloved properties in perpetuity, in increasing numbers. Since 2012, when a series of game-changing lawsuit settlement funds (directed to us by allied nonprofits) allowed the organization to staff up and develop a track record, the Land Trust's protected lands have expanded from 1600 acres to 23,000. Our staff has grown from 1 to 10. Our annual budget approaches \$2 million. We've raised \$8 million in grants. \$14 million worth of property has been donated to us.

It's a given that West Virginians love the land. But twelve years ago, we did not anticipate the growth in appetite for what we do. So like our conserved lands, we've expanded... and to meet this moment of growth, we're launching a strategic planning process to guide us into our next phase. We'd welcome your input, as stakeholders, about your perceptions of our role, our effectiveness, and future opportunities. If you'd like to be interviewed, please contact me: brent@wvlandtrust.org. We reflect the community that supports us... and we want to keep it up!

Thanks for making great things happen.

Brent Bailey, Ph.D.
Executive Director



I hope you'll decide to visit one of our preserves... or, better stated, one of YOUR preserves!"



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The Big Sandy



A Hidden Gem

Big Sandy Creek in North Central West Virginia is a sight to see. For more than a century, people have been gathering along its edges to enjoy stunning scenery and swim in its cool waters. In 1910, photographer Scott Gibson captured one of the earliest known images of this Preston County stream, showing Sunday churchgoers posing above Wonder Falls, a 20-foot sheer waterfall that keeps its name to this day (photo at right). Although the mountains surrounding Big Sandy were logged at the turn of the 20th century, today, tall hemlocks and hardwood forests line the stream's cobble- and boulder-stacked shorelines. In spring, flowering rhododendron thickets put on a show in the understory. Ask any local, and they will tell you that Big Sandy Creek is a hidden gem.



The Rising River

In the late 1960s, whitewater rafting outfitters started running commercial trips on the Cheat River. Thrill-seeking river guides who came to work for the outfitters naturally began exploring the countryside, looking for more runnable rapids. By the mid-1970s, young adventurers were paddling Big Sandy Creek, over Wonder Falls, and onward through a dozen other challenging rapids. What they could not know at the time was that they were also paving the way for the Lower Big Sandy to become one of the premier whitewater kayaking hotspots in the mid-Atlantic United States.

“Places like the Cheat River and Big Sandy Creek are special for so many reasons,” said Charlie Walbridge, who was among the early river guides who worked on the Cheat River and explored its tributary streams. “Not only were we paddling into these remote stretches of river that were thrilling and beautiful, but little did we know that we were also spurring the eventual rise of the adventure sports industry and, perhaps more importantly, we were forming a community of people who cared for these rivers.”

Conservation Takes Time

For years, everyone knew that much of the land surrounding the whitewater sections of the Cheat River and Big Sandy Creek was privately owned by Allegheny Power, but the company didn't restrict access and, for the most part, people could paddle the Cheat River and Big Sandy freely, although the rural roads into these areas were arguably as rough and remote as the rivers themselves.

In 2003, however, after decades of ownership, Allegheny Power sold its land along the Cheat River and Big Sandy. Despite an effort by the State of West Virginia to acquire the property, Allegheny Wood Products gained ownership, and it logged portions of the landscape for the following decade. In 2014, conservation groups worked with Allegheny Wood Products and the State of West Virginia to protect a substantial portion of land along the Cheat River as the Cheat Canyon Wildlife Management Area. But the timber company kept its land holdings along Big Sandy Creek. People remained hopeful that conservation could still be an option for this iconic landscape, but in 2020, Allegheny Wood Products sold its Big Sandy property to Waterfront Development Group, which announced plans for a private development along the popular whitewater section of the river that included Wonder Falls.



IT TAKES A VILLAGE

In 2020, conservation groups began discussing ways that they might be able to ensure river access for whitewater paddlers and potentially conserve a portion of the Waterfront Development property for public access. We are grateful to see this conservation project come to fruition and expand WVLT's portfolio of Special Places!

CONSERVATION TAKES TIME – SOMETIMES YEARS

From visiting with a landowner to completing all the Land Trust Alliance–required due diligence to working with an attorney to draft a legal contract, land conservation does not happen overnight.

A conservation easement is a voluntary contract negotiated between a landowner and WVLT in which the owner places permanent restrictions on future uses of their property to protect scenic, agricultural, wildlife, forest, or other significant attributes. Conservation easements are unique to each property, meaning they address site-specific conservation values and are tailored to meet the individual goals of landowners.

After a conservation easement is signed, the document is recorded in a county courthouse and becomes a legal instrument that obligates and gives WVLT the authority to visit the property at least once annually to ensure compliance with the conservation easement terms and to protect the easement in perpetuity.

WVLT's commitment to a conservation easement is something that we commit to forever!

Wood Thrush Retreat –a Passion Project

Over a hill and down a hollow in Putnam County sits a beautiful forested property owned by Larry Calhoun. Several years ago, Larry contacted WVLT to learn about ways to protect his property. In August 2024, this 87-acre property was placed under conservation easement by WVLT.

History of the land, as told by Larry Calhoun:

I moved to Putnam County in 1977, drawn by its rural charm. I discovered my property on a Tuesday, bought it that Friday, and moved into a trailer the next day. After clearing the land, I chose a site for my house on December 21st, camping there for a week.

I decided to build an “owner-built home” using telephone poles and rough-cut lumber, inspired by guidebooks. With my father’s supervision, I gradually bought materials, finishing the house after seven years for under \$20,000.

In 2001, while searching for property near Buffalo, I came across an old log cabin on Old Delta Road. After hearing it was to be destroyed, I met the new owner, who allowed me to take the logs for free if I cleaned the site. Over the next few months, I transported the logs home and stored them for restoration.

In 2006, my partner Will and I began restoring the cabin, uncovering pieces of 19th-century newspaper in the process. Title searches revealed it was built by a German immigrant named Huber in the 1880s.

After years of work, the cabin became a museum of sorts, filled with my mother’s preserved belongings from the 1940s. I believe in preserving this heritage for future generations, especially as the area rapidly developed since my arrival.

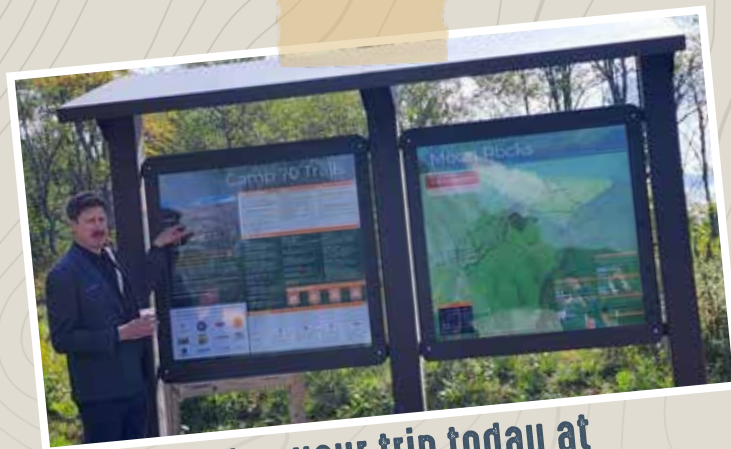
I learned about conservation easements to protect the property and envision a future nature preserve for public enjoyment. The conservation easement is finally in place, fulfilling my wish!



Mountaineer Trail Network Partnership in Tucker County

Yellow Creek Natural Area is the host site for many Tucker County outdoor activities, including Blackwater Bicycle Association's annual Revenge of the Rattlesnake mountain bike race, the Canaan Valley Mountain Bike Festival's group rides, hikes to Moon Rocks hosted by Canaan Valley Resort, and many more. In the fall of 2023, WVLT entered a partnership with Mountaineer Trail Network to update the signage in and around our Yellow Creek Natural Area.

The Mountaineer Trail Network was created by the West Virginia State Legislature in 2019 to spearhead an effort to make West Virginia a premier recreation area. MTN partnered with several organizations to create new signage and/or enhance existing signage. WVLT, along with Heart of the Highlands Trail System, Blackwater Bicycle Association, and the Tucker County CVB, joined forces to update the signage along Camp 70 Road in Davis, West Virginia, which leads into WVLT's Yellow Creek Natural Area. The new trail sign system is meant to make the area more accessible for visitors, with kiosks that include maps of the trails, suggested routes, and standard difficulty ratings.



Plan your trip today at WVLandtrust.org/YellowCreek.

Eagle Scout Project in Toms Run

The Boy Scouts have contributed many hours of work to WVLT over the years. They've completed a number of Eagle Scout projects, such as restoring the Ferrell Cemetery in the Wallace Hartman Nature Preserve in Kanawha County and restoring the forest at the Toms Run Preserve in Monongalia County.

This fall, DeAndre Jones of the Morgantown Troop will restore an important area of forest along the access road to the main parking lot in Toms Run Preserve. Formerly choked by autumn olive, multiflora rose, and honeysuckle, the area will soon have a very open understory and will be ready for planting of shade-tolerant trees like maples and beech. A few spots may be planted with white pine, our largest native pine, which will add winter cover for songbirds and brighten the otherwise monotonous winter brown of the deciduous forest.

The type of forest restoration work accomplished by DeAndre and his troop will have a lasting positive impact on the Preserve and accelerate the successional process that was until now restricted by the non-native invasive shrubs. Without this critical work, a large area of former cattle pasture at the Toms Run Preserve would take much, much longer to recover to native forest, if it ever would. But now, thanks to DeAndre's efforts, the native trees will grow much faster and new seedlings and saplings will be encouraged in the understory, moving the forest from a brushy "old-field" to a young and healthy hardwood forest.





Old-Growth Forest Network

The Old-Growth Forest Network (OGFN) is a national network of protected forests across the U.S. where people of all generations can experience biodiversity and the beauty of a natural forest. Their goal is to locate and designate at least one easily accessible protected old-growth, mature, or community forest in every county in the United States that has native forest, thus establishing, in cooperation with other networks of protected lands, a series of forests that represent the current ecological conditions at that particular latitude and longitude in our highly dynamic, rapidly changing world.

Fourteen forests in West Virginia have received OGFN recognition (see OldGrowthForest.net/West-Virginia), and two are located on West Virginia Land Trust properties. WVLT's Marie Hall Jones Ancient Forest Preserve in Doddridge County was designated part of the Network in 2023.

In June, the Elizabeth's Woods section of Toms Run Preserve in Monongalia County became the second WVLT property to join the network. Donated in 1995 by a founding land trust member, Elizabeth Zimmermann, this 82-acre tract of forest contains some of the least-disturbed stands of mixed-mesophotic forest in the area and has two loops that gently provide access to the quiet nature of the deciduous forest in our area. Along with the possibility of two more designations in Monongalia County in cooperation with partners, the Elizabeth's Woods forest will advance our outreach and environmental education programs and increase appreciation for the important benefits associated with healthy, intact natural forests.

Come hike the Elizabeth's and Hollenhorst Loops, both of which traverse lovely examples of a more mesic maple forest, in contrast with a drier oak-hickory forest—two examples of the range and variability of the rich and productive Central Appalachian Forest.

Plan your trip today at WVLandrust.org/TomsRun



Ancient Forest Trail

The Marie Hall Jones Ancient Forest Preserve, a 172-acre property located near West Union in Doddridge County, opened to the public last year as a nature preserve for hiking and nature study during daylight hours. The preserve includes a 30-acre stand of old growth trees, a historic spring house, a pedestrian bridge over Nutter Fork, and a covered pavilion containing two picnic tables.

The main trail through the preserve, Ridgeline Trail, follows the ridgeline and swivels through the forest for approximately three miles. In August, WVLT staff built an Old Growth Spur Trail, allowing hikers to gain exclusive access to a portion of the property's old growth trees.

WVLT is grateful for the generosity of the Jones family for funding the site development!

SCAN TO GIVE!



QR Codes at Our Preserves

If you have visited any of our nature preserves lately, you might have noticed the small signs that say "THANKS FOR BEING HERE," with a suggested \$5 donation. These donations are directed to the preserve of your choosing and support the ongoing management costs of owning and maintaining these places. We are grateful to those of you who have scanned and donated! These contributions help to keep our preserves in good shape and welcoming to the public.

Donations keep us humming!



Piney Creek Preserve ▲

This fall, City of Beckley employees and volunteers from the Piney Creek Watershed Association assisted WVLT in making improvements to the Waterfall Hollow Trail by spreading 50 tons of gravel. The primary objective was to fortify the trail, making it more accessible to more people and reducing the muddiness that has accumulated in the past. Waterfall Hollow Trail leads to two waterfalls—Cranberry Creek Cascades and Little Whitestick Falls —which were added to the West Virginia Tourism Waterfall Trail last year. If you haven't visited yet, plan your trip today at WVLandTrust.org/PineyCreek.

WVLT recently received a grant from the Beckley Area Foundation in the amount of \$5,200 to support further improvements to the Waterfall Hollow Trail, including the installation of three metal benches, the purchase and installation of 10 stone treads to replace the existing steps, the installation of a safety handrail along the steps, and the purchase of additional trail maintenance tools.

CorpsTHAT at Toms Run Preserve: Year 2

The Land Trust couldn't do the fieldwork that is so important for successful conservation without our many groups of volunteers. Whether it be Boy Scouts, West Virginia University students, local trail runners, or organizations like CorpsTHAT, our partnerships with volunteers are a win-win for everyone involved. CorpsTHAT is a special nonprofit organization that teaches conservation science to the Deaf Community through hands-on training in the outdoors, focusing on conservation and recreation careers, either in the federal government or in nonprofits like the West Virginia Land Trust.

When the group returned this summer to the Toms Run Preserve in Monongalia County to follow up on last summer's excellent trail work, the crew of five helped complete the Cascade Connector Trail that links the Hollenhorst Trail to the Morris Loop and Cascade Trail. The new trail is exceptionally scenic as it meanders through mature maple, oak, hickory, and yellow poplar and provides a view of the complex series of headwater springs that provide clean water to Toms Run and the Monongahela River—our source water in Morgantown. Featuring a purpose-built, hand-crafted, minimal disturbance foot-trail, the connection that CorpsTHAT created this summer provides yet another interesting hike, run, or dog-walk for our growing population of



trail users while at the same time wrapping up the excellent trail work they completed last summer while building the first section of the Connector. Their efforts, in combination with the outstanding training that they provide, benefit the West Virginia Land Trust, our growing population of hikers, and the CorpsTHAT crew members themselves, who will make additional contributions to conservation in the future. The West Virginia Land Trust is fortunate to be selected as a training area, and we are grateful for their ongoing commitments to developing the trail system at the Toms Run Preserve.

SPECIAL PLACES

A Celebration of **COMMUNITIES**

On September 12, 2024, more than 200 West Virginians gathered in Charleston for our annual Special Places Celebration at J.Q. Dickinson Salt-Works. Folks enjoyed a tour of the salt works, music by Minor Swing, and a gourmet dinner by Chef Paul Smith of 1010 Bridge and celebrated our 30th anniversary. Together, more than \$80,000 was raised to support our important work across the state! **We hope to see you next year!**



2024 Conservation Hero
Charlie Walbridge

Charlie, with 45 years in the whitewater industry as a racer, business owner, and longtime Safety Chair for American Whitewater, recently helped protect land along the Big Sandy that expands the conserved landscape of the Lower Cheat River. This land, which includes 4.25 miles of river frontage spanning almost the entire river-left side of the gorge, will soon be donated to WVLT. The property connects with public lands around WVLT's Jenkinsburg Recreation and Natural Area—where Charlie also spearheaded protection efforts. We are grateful for all of the people who stayed the course in protecting this special place—it's a big win for people, rivers, and wildlife!



Special Honorees: WVLT is grateful for the guidance and support of three long-term board members who have served for nearly 30 years: **Calvert Armbricht, Chap Donovan, and Jackie Hallinan.**



Community Recap



JUNE 1

Blue Jean Ball

Thank you to those who joined us at the 10th annual Blue Jean Ball on June 1, 2024, at Camp Muffly in Morgantown! We hope that those who attended had a great time and got a good sense of some of the exciting work being done in the Mon Valley to create public spaces for recreation, water protection, community building, and outdoor education. With more than 200 friends in attendance, together we raised over \$18,000, which will be split between West Virginia Land Trust and Mon River Trails Conservancy and directed towards green space projects in the Mon Valley. THANK YOU!

In recent years, we've reimagined the ball as a picnic, informal and welcoming to all ages. Attendees enjoyed gourmet sandwiches from Cheese Louise, local beer from Chestnut Brew Works, music by Chris Haddox, a raffle auction, and challenged friends at yard games. We hope to see you next year!



FALL '24

National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA)

West Virginia Interscholastic Cycling League (WVICTL) is the state's chapter of the National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA). WVICTL is one of 31 leagues across the country that organize mountain bike racing teams for middle and high school student athletes. Our state proudly sponsors 20 teams across the state. With a professional staff led by a committed board of directors, NICA exists to enable every American teen to strengthen mind, body, and character by participating in an interscholastic mountain bike racing experience that is co-ed, inclusive, and equal.

WVLT is a proud sponsor of the WVICTL. Our sponsorship covers the annual fee for a child to participate. By supporting this partner organization, we are helping to get more kids on bikes!



Community Recap



JUNE 30

FronD Fondling Along the Mon

Many of us recognize basic plant parts like petal, seed, and fruit—but could you identify a pinnule, sorus, or sporangium?

On June 30, Mike and Betsey Breiding led a Fern Walk along the Mon River Trail in Morgantown. The Breidings, self-professed “frond fondlers,” invited the community to share their passion for these abundant yet often overlooked forms of plant life. To the unpracticed eye, one type of fern can look indistinguishable from another, and that’s where the botanical parts come in. A fern’s leaf shape, color, and form give clues to its identity, but the arrangement of the sori—the plural of sorus, where a fern’s spores are found—can be the key to correct ID. Over the course of a few hours, Mike led the group in identifying 18 species of fern along a 1.2-mile stretch of the trail just south of town.

Mike’s interest in ferns runs deep. It was sparked in 1974 when he came across the book *The Pteridophytes of West Virginia*. Originally hailing from Wheeling, Mike has botanized all around West Virginia, the U.S., and the world. Such expertise can be intimidating, but he readily shares his knowledge and delight when teaching about ferns, eager to help others know and appreciate ferns as he does.



For more about ferns, visit Mike’s website at FronDFondler.us.

Snakes on a Trail (or Not)



Fear of venomous snakes can be significant for outdoor enthusiasts in West Virginia, but retired WVDNR biologist Frank Jernejcic wants to reassure everyone that these fears are exaggerated.

“You’re more likely to trip and fall while fleeing a snake than to be bitten,” he says. From 2016 to 2023, Frank and his team documented over 1,300 human-snake encounters in popular recreation areas, yet there were no reported snake bites during that time.

Examining records from 1961 to 2023, Frank found only 13 deaths from timber rattler bites, primarily linked to snake-handling church services, with just two occurring in forests. Snakes generally prefer to avoid humans, and the striking range of a timber rattler is only about half its body length, which averages three feet.

Frank’s monitoring project helps reduce human encounters by relocating snakes spotted near people. This year alone, he has moved around 30 timber rattlers.

Timber rattlers and copperheads are the only venomous snakes in West Virginia, with no recorded deaths from copperhead bites. Frank is encouraged by the growing understanding and respect for these remarkable creatures, stating, “It used to be the only good snake was a dead one, but now they’re getting the status they deserve.”



“

As these beautiful lands and wildlife become more threatened by encroaching development, subdivisions, and mining, this land should continue to evolve as a place supporting healthy ecosystems, forest land, biodiversity, and wildlife habitat while also allowing sustainable farming when needed now and into the future.” – **Mark Mueller**

SUPPORTING OUR WORK



Protecting Land with a Legacy of Love

The foresight and generosity of a donor's bequest to the West Virginia Land Trust will expand land and water protection in the Sweedlin Valley in Pendleton County and south along Shenandoah Mountain. The seven-figure gift from the estate of Mark Mueller is the largest bequest WVLT has received to date.

The gift is the result of an intentional process initiated by Mark, who passed away in 2022. When he learned he was ill with pancreatic cancer, he wished to leave a legacy to support his early love of nature conservation and sustainable agriculture. "My heart is in conserving and expanding wilderness during this time of mass extinction," he told WVLT.

During the pandemic, Mark, whose career was in clinical health research in Washington, D.C., had purchased a West Virginia farm with two of his friends. Their initial approach to WVLT was to create a conservation easement on their property. After his terminal diagnosis, Mark wanted to do more.

Working closely with Amy Cimarolli, who leads the Land Trust's Land Protection efforts, Mark documented his desire to protect wild and agricultural lands near his farm, which led to establishing the Mark Mueller Conservation Fund in his final years. Mark's friends and family contributed to the Mueller Fund in his honor, and Mark's estate gift will now expand the Fund's ability to acquire, protect, and restore land in the region.

The West Virginia Land Trust is grateful to Mark for his generosity and vision in protecting the family farms of Sweedlin Valley and the surrounding mountain and valley habitats.

If you'd like to discuss a planned gift to the West Virginia Land Trust, please reach out to Robinne Gray, Director of Resource Development, at 403-314-0945 or rgray@wvlandtrust.org



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GIFTS CREATE GROWTH

Give Generously While Enjoying Tax Benefits!

As we approach the end of the tax year, we want to take a moment to remind you about two possibilities for giving from your retirement accounts. Depending on your age, you may be eligible to make a qualified charitable distribution (QCD) and/or a required minimum distribution (RMD). The main difference between the two is that a QCD is a tax-free donation to charity available to those 70.5 or older, while an RMD is a required withdrawal from an IRA for those 73 or older.

Making a charitable gift from your retirement may come with tax benefits by reducing your taxable income, and directing a generous contribution to the West Virginia Land Trust helps save more land and protect more water across the beautiful Mountain State.

Contact your retirement plan administrator to arrange your gift.
WVLT's tax number is 55-0740909.

