



The new tract protects the northern reaches of the Cumberland River's Big South Fork. © Ben Childers

## Partnering to Protect Land

### The Nature Conservancy adds 460 acres to Big South Fork

The Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area is 460 acres larger now, thanks to a new partnership between The Nature Conservancy in Kentucky and the National Park Service. The land protects the northern reaches of the Cumberland River's Big South Fork, a biodiversity hotspot and sought-after paddling site, making the partnership a win-win for nature and people.

"This tract of land is now permanently protected and open for public enjoyment," says park superintendent Niki Stephanie Nicholas. "We have long sought to buy this land, and thanks to assistance from The Nature Conservancy, we have achieved that goal."

The tract of land was the largest private inholding on the Kentucky side of the park, essentially creating a hole in the park that made management more

difficult and navigation for park visitors more of a challenge. The Park Service needed funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) to acquire the property, but the land was offered for sale before the park received the funding. TNC stepped in to buy the property and hold it for the eventual transfer of ownership to the Park Service.

"This shows just how important the LWCF is for our partners," says Dian Osbourne, director of protection for the Kentucky chapter. "Without this funding, the Park Service would not be able to purchase properties within their boundaries. We're grateful to the Park Service for continuing to add important properties like this to their ownership for the benefit of nature and the public."

The bipartisan Great American Outdoors Act, passed in 2020, provides

\$900 million for the LWCF annually, funded by offshore oil and gas revenues rather than tax dollars. The landmark conservation legislation provides critical investments in access to public land. Passage of the Act will allow more partnering opportunities for TNC.

"We thank the members of our Kentucky congressional delegation who championed this legislation in 2020, led by Senator McConnell," says Heather Majors, director of external affairs for the Kentucky chapter. "The Great American Outdoors Act is the largest investment in conservation in a generation and a huge win for nature and people."

The Kentucky chapter also offers its gratitude to The Wyss Foundation, which facilitated the land purchase with a no-cost loan to TNC.



Conservation agriculture practices can be costly in the short term, but provide benefits to water quality and soil health. © Mike Wilkinson



Agriculture provides 250,000 jobs in Kentucky. © Mike Wilkinson

# A New Strategy for Agriculture

## The Nature Conservancy scales up its work within the farming industry

Agriculture provides us with the food and fiber needed to sustain human life. It is critical to Kentucky's economy, generating more than 250,000 jobs and nearly \$50 billion of economic impact. Half of Kentucky's land is farmland.

However, agriculture also has a big impact on nature. The needs of a growing population have fueled conversion of wildlife habitat and wetlands to agricultural land. This threatens biodiversity, while nutrient run-off from croplands washes excess nitrogen and phosphorus into the Mississippi River, affecting water quality in Kentucky all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. Kentucky leads the way in no-till farming, a critical practice for soil health, but our state is also a significant contributor of nutrient pollution.

The Nature Conservancy in Kentucky is diving deeper into the world of agriculture, with a new strategy to engage farmers, their suppliers, and companies purchasing agricultural products at a higher level. In the past, TNC in Kentucky worked one-on-one with farmers. Now, the chapter will scale up its conservation message to reach more farmers and corporations.

"We can't achieve the scale that needs to be achieved by just working

directly with farmers," says Zach Luttrell, director of agriculture for the Kentucky and Tennessee chapters. "We're still promoting the same ground-level outcomes as before—things like cover cropping, no-till farming, and nutrient management—but we're beginning to work at a larger scale as we try to influence key decision-makers throughout the supply chain."

When developing the new strategy, Luttrell identified the western half of Kentucky as the focal area for the next several years. This is where the state's most intensive row crop farming is located. Also, the presence of the Mississippi River and other major rivers means that better management of these croplands can have an important impact on conservation.

One strategy that the Kentucky chapter is pursuing is to spread knowledge of conservation practices through demonstration. Working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and commodity groups, TNC is supporting on-farm demonstration sites to show the benefits of conservation agriculture practices, specifically cover-cropping. Cover-cropping means growing a non-cash crop during the winter to

protect and build the soil. It reduces nitrogen run-off by approximately 31 percent, and phosphorus run-off by around 55 percent.

The conservation benefits of cover-cropping are significant, but it can be challenging to make this practice profitable in the short term. Other conservation practices that occur at the edge of crop fields, such as stream buffers, offer significant benefits to the environment but can be costly.

"We need to find new sources of funding to help farms bridge knowledge gaps or otherwise remain profitable while adopting new conservation practices," Luttrell says. "This is where companies within the agricultural supply chain may be able to help."

Many food companies have ambitious greenhouse gas emission reduction goals. Part of Kentucky's new strategy is to work with these corporations and help them bring their sustainability plans from the board room to the field. If the agricultural supply chain can provide needed resources to farmers to add these conservation practices to their operations, it would be a win-win for nature and people.