

THE HIGH KNOB HERALD

SPRING EDITION

The Clinch Coalition
Newsletter

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Southwest Virginia Residents Applaud State Regulators' Notice of Environmental Damage on the Spearhead Trails System

The new 'Leave a Tip' Feature on our website has had more traction!

WISE, VIRGINIA — Southwest Virginia environmental organization The Clinch Coalition (TCC) applauds the recent release of documents by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) highlighting more than 15 “potential or actual” violations of numerous water quality laws and regulations on the Spearhead Trails system. Spearhead Trails, which manages a network of more than 500 miles of trails built for off-road vehicles and nonmotorized users, is a state government instrumentality run by the Southwest Regional Recreation Authority and funded annually by the Virginia legislature.

Since 2018, TCC has been a conduit for a growing number of complaints from Southwest Virginia residents about environmental degradation on the Spearhead Trails network, which includes trails spread across communities in Wise, Lee, Dickenson, Buchanan, and Tazewell Counties. A large portion of the trail network is on lands recently acquired by The Nature Conservancy's Cumberland Forest Project and has been constructed using additional funding from the Virginia Tobacco Commission and Virginia Coalfield Economic Development Authority.

Citizen complaints have included streambeds in the Clinch, Russell Fork, and New River watersheds being excavated into ATV trails,

as well as severe erosion and runoff issues from poorly-maintained trails and construction without required state and federal permits. Other complaints have come from homeowners whose properties have reportedly been damaged by runoff and erosion from upstream trails. TCC and others have previously reported these complaints to state regulators with the Virginia DEQ.

“The Clinch Coalition is supportive of outdoor recreation as an economic development tool, including recreational trails,” said Sharon Fisher, TCC President. “However, Southwest Virginia is also home to some of North America's most fragile ecosystems, meaning that we must take special care to develop our outdoor assets responsibly. What we have seen on the Spearhead Trails network to date is a concerning failure of responsible recreation development and trail management, as well as a clear attempt to cut corners and disregard environmental laws.”

Spearhead Trails officials have for years denied the existence of significant problems on the trail system, with the organization's recent newsletters touting the system as “the most environmentally sound trail system in the country.” However, DEQ's April 29, 2021 Memorandum of Agreement, signed by Southwest Regional Recreation Authority chairman Jack McClanahan and Virginia DEQ director David Paylor, acknowledges 16 different potential or actual environmental violations or significant regulatory concerns occurring throughout the Spearhead Trails network.

Among the problems uncovered by DEQ inspectors are erosion and runoff stemming from poor construction and maintenance practices, as well as the excavation of streambeds and trail construction without permits required by state and federal law. State inspectors have also documented off-road vehicles being allowed to operate in the streambeds of numerous public waterways and sediment pollution from those trails entering streams. Sedimentation has been cited by researchers as a major threat to Southwest Virginia's waterways, which are home to one of North America's highest concentrations of rare and federally-protected aquatic wildlife.

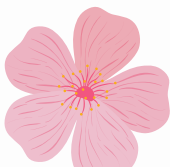
DEQ inspectors also note that, when pressed for evidence of state and federal permits that are required by law prior to excavating waterways, Spearhead Trails officials could neither produce evidence of such permits nor even show that the environmental assessments required as part of the permitting process were ever performed.

In response to the Virginia DEQ's notice of potential violations, Spearhead Trails agrees in the Memorandum of Agreement to voluntarily alter its operations to begin following state and federal environmental laws. The provisions include running future trail development plans by DEQ officials and developing plans to remediate the issues that the organization's existing trails have already caused across numerous Southwest Virginia communities.

TCC members applauded the move but stress that state regulators need to take further steps to ensure that the problems they have identified are corrected.

“This week's developments are a positive step forward for Southwest Virginia and validate the many concerned residents who have reached out to us in recent years,” Fisher says. “DEQ's documents make it clear, though, that Spearhead Trails has for years disregarded numerous environmental laws and regulations, using millions of dollars of funding from Virginia taxpayers to damage Southwest Virginia's waterways. DEQ should immediately begin formal enforcement action to hold Spearhead Trails accountable for the damage it has caused and close the cited trail segments so that they can recover while remediation plans are being developed.”

A full copy of Virginia DEQ's April 29, 2021 Memorandum of Agreement can be viewed at this link, with detailed documentation of state inspectors' findings, including photo evidence, at this link. Local residents encountering any issues of environmental concern in Southwest Virginia can report those concerns to TCC anonymously using the organization's “Leave a Tip” tool at <https://www.clinchcoalition.org/leave-a-tip>.



Activities

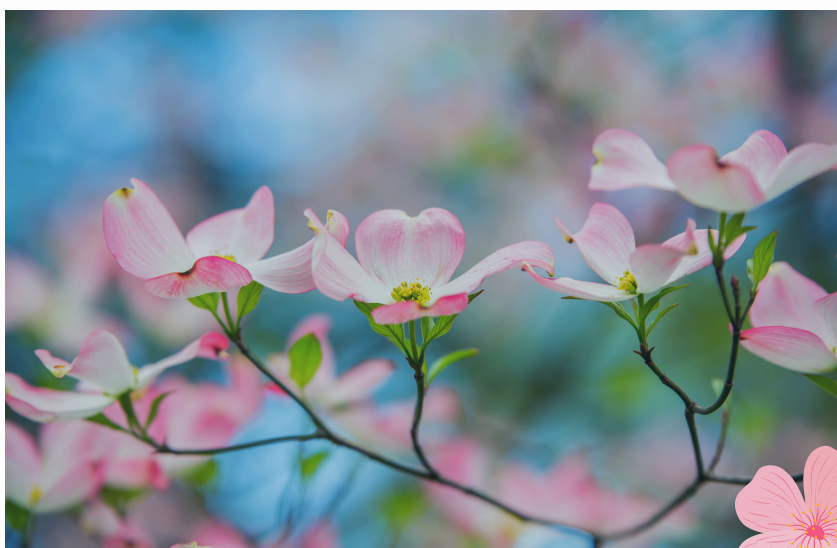
What's new on High Knob?

High Knob Naturalist Rally: We are working on our High Knob Naturalist Rally for September! Keep up to date with our plans on our Facebook and Instagram (@theclinchcoalition), as well as our website! If you would like to be involved or volunteer, please do not hesitate to reach out to us at clinchcoalition@gmail.com.

Tree of the Month

Dogwood
(*Cornus florida*)

Cornus florida, better known as dogwood, is quite a sight to behold in the spring time! Its flowers often have shades ranging from white to pink to scarlet in the spring, and they are native to North America! The dogwood is the state tree of Virginia, Missouri and North Carolina, and it is also Virginia's state flower! In terms of its medicinal uses, people have been known to use American dogwood for headaches, fatigue, and fever! It is believed to increase strength, to stimulate appetite, and serve as a tonic. There can be no better tree to represent the strength and fortitude of Virginia and our people!



Animal of the Month

Northern Cardinal - *Cardinalis cardinalis*

The Northern Cardinal is one of the most iconic birds flying around. With the male's often bright red plumage and masked eyes, it is a striking animal to behold during the day. Northern Cardinals are classified as granivorous animals, due to their diet consisting of mostly seeds. Their short cone-shaped beaks are specially designed to crack open the hulls on seeds and shells on nuts. As such, you will often see cardinals at your bird feeder! In fact, it's been known by ornithologists that cardinals are usually the first to visit bird feeders in the mornings, and the last to visit in the evenings. The average lifespan of a cardinal is 3 years, they are monogamous, and the male cardinals get their vibrant red color from the carotenoids (red, yellow, and orange pigments) that are naturally present in their food!



Fun Fact:
The City of Norton is the wettest town or city in Virginia on an annual basis (over decades) as verified by data scans at the UVA Climatology Office in Charlottesville and others.