



## **2021 Western North Carolina Conservation Priorities June 24, 2021 Updated for Senate Budget**

### **Protect Public Health – and the Jobs and Businesses that Rely on Clean Water**

Runoff and other pollution can make WNC rivers and streams unsafe for the thousands of adults and children who swim, tube, paddle and play in them every year. Contaminated water poses health problems, including gastrointestinal, skin, ear, respiratory, eye, neurologic and wound infections. Children, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems can suffer from even more severe illness if infected. According to the NC Department of Health and Human Services “water-borne illnesses of the greatest public health significance are those transmitted in recreational water, drinking water, and flood waters” in North Carolina. Water quality testing in the heavily-used French Broad River watershed indicates the presence of E. coli and other contaminants, at levels that are unsafe for human exposure an average of approximately one day out of every three during the course of a year. In 2015, more than 55,000 people used a commercial outfitter to enjoy the French Broad, with most people floating the river in inner tubes. Canoes and kayaks were also popular rentals, and thousands more used the river without an outfitter. Other WNC rivers experience similar levels of recreational use.

To protect public health and protect the jobs and businesses that rely on safe recreational waters, MountainTrue supports the following initiatives to reduce bacterial pollution:

- **Increase funding to help farmers improve water quality.** Agricultural waste is a significant source of E. coli and other bacterial pollution in WNC rivers and streams. Unfortunately, state funding to help WNC farmers afford these improvements far outstrips demand. Expanding funding for local Soil and Water Conservation Districts to meet this demand is critical to improving recreational water quality in WNC. The current Agricultural Cost Share Program typically receives as much as \$20 million in requests for \$4 million in annual funding. Doubling the state’s investment in this program to \$8 million would be a significant step in the right direction – and help reduce bacterial pollution in WNC waters. **Not included in Senate budget.**
- **Reinstate the successful WaDE program to address failing septic systems.** Failing septic systems are another major source of pathogens in our waterways. During an 8-year period the Waste Detection Elimination (WaDE) program visited 13,379 WNC homes and identified 2,016 sources of water pollution in WNC – mostly from leaking and failing septic systems. Unfortunately, funding for this successful effort was eliminated in 2009. Restoring \$200,000 to restart the WaDE program will help reduce pollution associated with failing septic systems. **Senate budget includes \$200,000 NR in second year of the biennium.**

For more information about these projects please contact Gray Jernigan with MountainTrue at [gray@mountaintrue.org](mailto:gray@mountaintrue.org) or (828) 423-0578.

- **Help property owners reduce stormwater pollution.** The Community Conservation Assistance Program (CCAP) allows WNC's Soil and Water Conservation Districts to help property owners reduce stormwater pollution in impaired waters. Like the cost share program for farmers, demand for CCAP assistance is insufficient to meet demand. Providing WNC SWCD's with \$500,000 for the CCAP program will significantly reduce stormwater pollution in rivers and streams already impacted by bacterial pollution. **Not included in Senate budget.**
- **Improve the NC DEQ laboratory to keep up with water quality testing.** MountainTrue supports the creation of a statewide E. coli standard via the administrative process associated with the Triennial Review. To support the implementation of this standard. The NC Department of Environmental Quality's (DEQ) outdated Reedy Creek laboratory needs \$250,000 to update its facility and perform water quality testing required for a statewide standard. Plans for this upgrade are already in place, making the project shovel-ready. **Not included in Senate budget.**
- **Maintain WNC Landslide Mapping Efforts** - Landslides present a significant and ongoing public safety threat in Western North Carolina. Without additional funding the state's landslide mapping program will be crippled. Providing NC DEQ with \$370,000 recurring will retain the WNC staff now overseeing the landslide mapping effort. **Included in Senate budget.**
- **Big Hungry Dam Removal, Green River, Henderson County** – Built between 1911 and 1913 and out of service for decades, the Big Hungry Dam is on NC gamelands and is currently the largest dam slated for removal in WNC and the most highly-ranked for removal by American Rivers, based on the benefit to water quality, habitat, public access and flood control - \$7.5 million. **Included in Senate budget.**

## WNC Conservation and Recreation Investments

Outdoor recreation brings \$28 billion in consumer spending and supports 260,000 jobs in North Carolina. WNC's robust outdoor recreation industry is crucial to the economic benefit to the state. Modest investments in WNC's outdoor recreation infrastructure will bring more people to the region and boost its tourism economy. (\* indicates the request was included in the legislature's budget for the 2019-2020 biennium).

- Expand camping and fishing tourism with investment in the Watauga River Paddle Trail in Watauga County (\$150,000 nonrecurring). **Included in Senate budget.**
- Improve public access to a popular recreational area on the Green River Game Lands in Henderson and Polk counties (\$150,000 nonrecurring). **Included in Senate budget.**

- Improve fish habitat and fishing access by providing matching funds to remove the Ward's Mill Dam on the Watauga River in Watauga County (\$100,000 nonrecurring). **Included in Senate budget.**
- Improve outdoor recreation on the Tuckasegee River in Swain County by beginning implementation of the Tuckasegee River Alliance's existing river park plan, including Island Park trail improvement, eradication of invasive species, native plant propagation, and river bank and access improvements between Island Park and downtown Bryson City. Also supported by the Tuckasegee River Alliance and the Town of Bryson City. (\$200,000 nonrecurring). **Included in Senate budget.**
- Expand fishing, canoeing and kayaking on the Valley River in Cherokee County as called for in a recreational access plan funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission in 2014 by constructing a new public access point for float boats on property owned by Town of Andrews and develop paddle trail signage all at five river access points. (\$125,000 nonrecurring). **Included in Senate budget.**
- Improve outdoor recreation by providing funding to the City of Shelby in Cleveland County for the development of a public fishing and boating access on the First Broad River (\$150,000 nonrecurring). **Included in Senate budget.**
- Enhance a public amenity and stream access point while restoring stream health to improve water quality, create aquatic habitat and provide an environmental education opportunity to residents and visitors of the Bakersville Creekwalk in Mitchell County (\$200,000 nonrecurring). **Included in Senate budget.**
- Protect boating access on Lake Adger by supporting a \$1.8 million public access dredging project with partial funding to Polk County to be used as grant matching funds (\$200,000 non-recurring). **Not included in Senate budget** (but Senate budget includes \$6.5M for Lake Adger dam repair, which we support).

## **Open Space Conservation Funding**

Land and water are North Carolina's most important natural *and* economic assets. Three of the major engines of Western North Carolina's economy – agriculture, tourism and forestry – depend on natural and working lands and clean water. Protecting these vital natural resources is essential to ensure these economic drivers, and others, will continue to flourish and provide jobs for North Carolinians, particularly in rural areas of the state. MountainTrue supports the protection and expansion of funding to pre-recession levels for the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund as well as the North Carolina Land and Water Fund (formerly known as Clean Water Management Trust Fund) for our parks, critical habitat and for maintaining the health of critical watersheds. The Senate budget makes substantial investments in open space conservation, including:

- Land and Water Fund
  - Additional \$60 million NR in FY21-22. Brings total to \$73.2 million for the year.
  - Additional \$40 million NR in FY22-23. Brings total to \$53.2 million for the year.
- Parks and Recreation Trust Fund
  - Additional \$60 million NR in FY21-22. Brings total to \$76.2 million for the year.
  - Additional \$40 million NR in FY22-23. Brings total to \$56.2 million for the year.
- Farmland Preservation Trust Fund
  - Additional \$35 million NR in FY21-22. Brings total to \$39.3 million for the year.
  - Additional \$20 million NR in FY21-22. Brings total to \$24.3 million for the year.
- State Parks Water and Sewer Projects
  - \$40 million NR in FY21-22
- \$9 million NR in FY21-22 and \$3.2 million NR in FY22-23 for Pisgah View State Park