

Earthworms and Mega-Developments

Invasive species from the little to the large threaten land in and around the Smokies; South Carolina land is preserved and West Virginia drilling roadblocked.

BY CATHRYN MCCUE

TWO RECENTLY launched websites can help residents of the Blue Ridge region track drought conditions and mountaintop removal mining issues. The National Climatic Data Center has set up drought.gov to provide comprehensive information on emerging and ongoing droughts and impacts to local communities, and to enhance the nation's drought preparedness. A coalition of environmental groups have set up ilovemountains.org, where visitors type in their zip code to learn where their electricity comes from, see aerial photos of mountaintop removal mines, hear from people affected by the practice and learn how to cut back on energy use.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Stumphouse Mountain and its legendary Issaqueena Falls – among South Carolina's most treasured natural landmarks – have been preserved, thanks to fast action by multiple non-profits, individual donors, foundations, government agencies and hundreds of citizens. When word of a potential development swirled through Walhalla in early 2007, residents of

the town, Oconee County and beyond sprang to action. With funding from the S.C. Conservation Bank, Walhalla put a conservation easement on 440 acres in the Stumphouse watershed; the easement is held by Upstate Forever. The Nature Conservancy and S.C. Department of Natural Resources teamed up to acquire another 511 acres including the falls. The area will be held by the state as a natural preserve, open to the public. dnr.sc.gov

WEST VIRGINIA

Two separate energy projects proposed for the Mountain State were dealt blows in December. The Department of Environmental Protection denied a request by Cabot Oil & Gas Corp. to drill in Chief Logan State Park for up to 500 million cubic feet of natural gas under the 3,600-acre park in Logan County. The agency cited state law prohibiting any drilling in any state park. The company told the *Charleston Gazette* it may consider suing the state. Also, a staff engineer with the Public Service Commission and other experts urged the panel to reject Allegheny Energy's proposed transmission line across northern West Virginia as uneconomical and environmentally harmful. At a Jan. 9 hearing, the commission heard testimony that the Trans-Allegheny Interstate Line is designed in part to increase coal production from Appalachia and transmit the energy to eastern cities. The commission is scheduled to rule in May. wvgazette.com/section/Series/Lines+of+Power

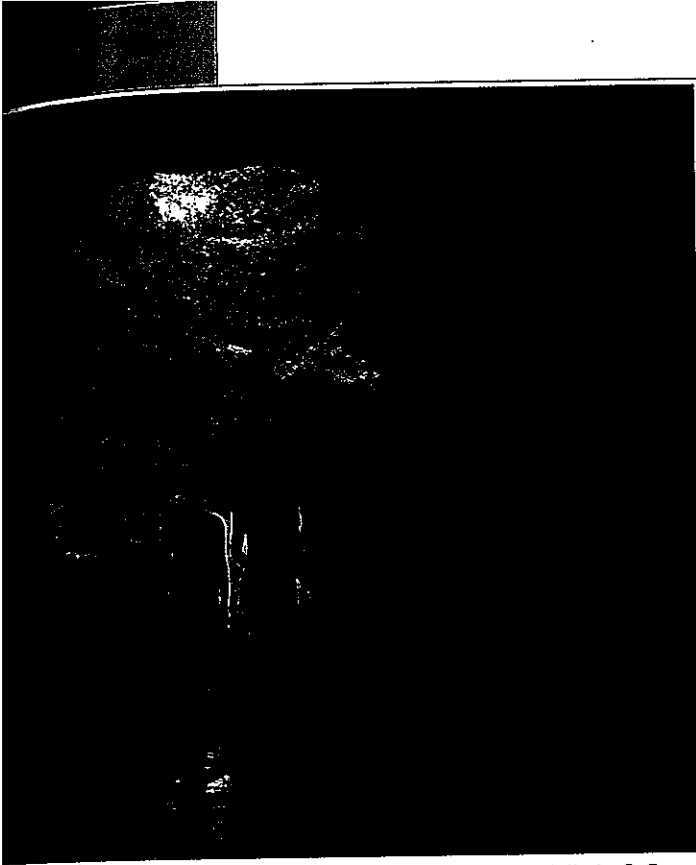
ALABAMA

The Tennessee Valley Authority has applied to build two nuclear reactors in Jackson County at

A FISHERS FAVORITE IS THREATENING THE SMOKIES

Kudzu, spiny wood, allamoose tree, hemlock woolly adelgid – now add to the growing list of invasive plants and critters threatening Appalachian forests: the Asian earthworm.

Introduced to the U.S. more than a century ago on imported Japanese plants, the worms are fairly common, a favorite of anglers who use them as bait, inadvertently expanding the worm's range. Asian worms are increasingly found in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and other forests where they voraciously devour the critical layer of leaf litter in the soil – causing concern of greater disruptions to come in the forest ecosystem, says U.S. Forest Service researcher Mac Callahan. —CM



TONY SMITH

Stumphouse Tunnel (left) and Issaqueena Falls in S.C. are now protected as part of a state-held natural preserve.

its abandoned Bellefonte site, where the agency suspended work on a nuclear power plant in the late 1980s. The application was submitted jointly with NuStart Energy LLC, a consortium of utilities and nuclear vendors, and under new Nuclear Regulatory Commission rules combining the process for getting construction and operation permits. The commission's review will take four years. If the permit is granted, the TVA board will make the ultimate decision whether to build the facility, estimated to cost \$7 billion. tva.gov

KENTUCKY

Following a lawsuit filed by Sierra Club and Kentucky Waterways Alliance, the Corps of Engineers in early January suspended a permit allowing ICG Hazard to expand its coal mine in Leslie County. The permit would have increased the mountaintop removal mine by almost 1,000 acres, destroying about 4,400 acres of pristine wilderness and filling nearby valleys with mining waste, according to the environmental groups' press release. The waste would have

The Southern Environmental Law Center released a report in December showing the link between short-sighted transportation and land use policies and climate change in Virginia:

80.3 BILLION
Miles driven in 2005, the equivalent of driving farther than to the sun and back every day

40 YEARS
Time it will take, at current rates, for Virginia to develop more land than in past 400 years

34 PERCENT
Rise of greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 to 2004, with transportation the single largest source

buried two miles of stream and polluted more stream miles which feed into the Kentucky River – a water source for more than one million people, the groups say. It was the first time the corps has suspended one of its coal-mining permits in Kentucky. kentucky.sierraclub.org

NORTH CAROLINA

Rumors of a mega-development in Haywood County that have floated around for years are over, replaced by official word from Cataloochee Companies LLC of their plans for a 4,500-acre project. Cataloochee Wilderness Resort calls for more than one million square feet of leasable area in 30 buildings, a 14-screen cinema, restaurants, a 100-room hotel, a ski resort, two lakes, two golf courses and 2,250 single-family lots. The company must first obtain a handful of local and state permits, secure investments and acquire virtually all the land from private landowners, a number of whom have already said they would not sell, as reported in the *Smoky Mountain News* in November.