

Cumberland Forest



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Press Release

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Largest Conservation Easement in Kentucky Announced

54,560-acre Cumberland Forest Wildlife Management Area receives permanent protection, features public recreation access

[The Nature Conservancy](#) (TNC), the [Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources](#) (Kentucky Fish and Wildlife), and the [Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation](#) (RMEF) announced today the largest conservation easement in Kentucky history on the nearly 55,000-acre Cumberland Forest Wildlife Management Area in Bell, Knox, and Leslie counties. The conservation easement provides permanent protection and public access to the property.

The property, previously known as C.F. Ataya WMA, is part of the [Cumberland Forest Project](#), an impact investment fund operated by TNC that manages 253,000 acres spanning Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia.

“This public access conservation easement is a great achievement for all involved and exactly the type of outcome Cumberland Forest was designed to make possible,” said Greg Meade, director of the Cumberland Forest Project. “Backed by investors, we are able to manage a property this large with a

focus on benefits for people and nature. And with the cooperation and dedication of many partners in Kentucky, this easement permanently protects this critically important place while also guaranteeing access for public use and enjoyment.”

The easement will be held by Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. Already a popular hunting destination for elk and other species thanks to an annual agreement between TNC and Kentucky Fish and Wildlife, the property is now permanently open to the public for recreation activities such as hiking, wildlife watching, and hunting.

“Acquisition of the Cumberland Forest WMA is a tremendous victory for both wildlife conservation and public access,” said Rich Storm, commissioner of Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. “It demonstrates how we can accomplish so much more working together than we can as individual organizations. I want to thank the Kentucky General Assembly and all our partners for their financial and other support to secure this area for current and future generations to enjoy.”

Eastern Kentucky is prized for its beauty and outdoor recreation opportunities. It is also critically important for nature. The [Appalachian Mountains](#) are a crucial migratory corridor for wildlife, especially as the climate changes. These mountains are some of the most intact temperate hardwood forests remaining in the world and support a variety of fish and wildlife species.

“It is hard to overstate the size and significance of this conservation effort,” said David Phemister, state director for TNC in Kentucky. “This easement conserves an important piece of the Appalachian Mountains, protects fish and wildlife habitat, and allows Kentuckians and visitors alike public access and enjoyment. I am proud of The Nature Conservancy and our partners’ hard work to secure this win, and I am especially grateful to the Kentucky General Assembly for its support.”

The partner organizations are at work on a public recreation management plan to guide hunting and other recreation activities. Research projects on elk and other species, as well as [reforestation of former mine lands](#), forest management, and other habitat work will continue. The Nature Conservancy, Green Forests Work, and Beam Suntory have already planted more than 160,000 trees on the property to enhance climate resiliency and provide food and habitat for wildlife.

“This is a momentous conservation milestone for Kentucky’s elk range and the creation of hunter access. The Ataya project marks a significant step in ensuring the future of Appalachian elk herds, other wildlife, their habitat and hunting,” said Kyle Weaver, RMEF president and CEO. “This incredible achievement would not be possible without our partners at the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, The Nature Conservancy and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.”

Funding for the easement came from several sources. Kentucky’s General Assembly invested \$3.875 million in the project to match more than \$12 million from the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act, secured by Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. RMEF secured a \$650,000 grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

In addition to the financial investment, the Kentucky General Assembly played an important role in passing legislation that enabled the easement.

“I am thrilled to witness the culmination of our collaborative efforts in the closing of the Cumberland Forest easement,” said Senator Robin L. Webb (D-Grayson). “This achievement is a testament to Kentucky's commitment to conservation and public access, particularly benefiting Bell, Knox, and Leslie counties. The General Assembly's support, evidenced by both the state appropriation in 2022 and the enabling legislation across 2022 and 2023, has been instrumental in this success. I am honored to have played a role in this significant project, and I eagerly anticipate joining the community in a larger celebration on the property this spring. Together, we have secured a legacy of environmental stewardship and outdoor enjoyment for generations to come.”

Public access to the easement will support the economic benefits of outdoor recreation in eastern Kentucky. Statewide, the total economic impact of wildlife-related recreation, including wildlife watching and hunting, is estimated at \$5.9 billion annually. Interest in viewing and hunting elk is growing, and these activities bring in millions of dollars per year to the region's economy.

“This is a significant victory for Kentucky's sportsmen and all residents of eastern Kentucky,” said Senator Brandon Smith (R-Hazard). “The secured easement not only ensures expanded access to public lands but also plays a vital role in our collective commitment to preserving and safeguarding our beloved mountains and the wildlife that inhabits them. I particularly want to thank Commissioner Rich Storm, whose leadership and dedication were instrumental in guiding this project across the finish line. His commitment to our region and ensuring the protection of our public lands is an invaluable asset. This collaborative partnership between the General Assembly, the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife, and The Nature Conservancy serves as a shining example of what can be accomplished when a diverse coalition joins forces for the common purpose of responsibly conserving our public lands.”

The easement represents a rare ownership interest for Kentucky Fish and Wildlife in their 16-county elk restoration zone in eastern Kentucky. Cumberland Forest WMA features diverse habitat and is highly utilized by elk. Permanent access will enable long-term elk research and habitat management projects as well as access to a variety of game species for Kentucky's resident and nonresident hunters.

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About The Nature Conservancy

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a global conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Guided by science, we create innovative, on-the-ground solutions to our world's toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together. We are tackling climate change, conserving lands, waters and oceans at an unprecedented scale, providing food and water sustainably and helping make cities more sustainable. Working in 76 countries and territories—37 by direct conservation impact and 39 through partners—we use a collaborative approach that engages local communities, governments, the private sector, and other partners. To learn more, visit [nature.org/kentucky](https://www.nature.org/kentucky) or follow us on [Facebook](#) or [Instagram](#).

About Kentucky Fish and Wildlife

The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (Kentucky Fish and Wildlife) is the state agency responsible for stewardship of the wild animals of the Commonwealth—public resources held in trust for current and future generations. Kentucky Fish and Wildlife’s mission is to conserve, protect and enhance Kentucky’s fish and wildlife resources and provide outstanding opportunities for hunting, fishing, trapping, boating, shooting sports, wildlife viewing, and related activities. To learn more, visit fw.ky.gov or follow us on [Facebook](#) or [Instagram](#).

About the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

Founded more than 39 years ago and fueled by hunters, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) maintains more than 225,000 members and has conserved more than 8.7 million acres for elk and other wildlife. RMEF also works to open and improve public access, fund and advocate for science-based resource management, and ensure the future of America’s hunting heritage. RMEF’s mission is to ensure the future of elk, other wildlife, their habitat and our hunting heritage. To learn more, visit rmef.org or follow us on [Facebook](#) or [Instagram](#).