

The Need for an Essential Investment in Kentucky Lands and Waters

Kentuckians are rightfully proud of our Commonwealth. Kentucky is a beautiful state with rich traditions rooted in our lands, waters, and wildlife. From hiking and hunting in public forests to enjoying the bounty of local farmlands to boating and fishing our rivers and streams—our lands and waters are integral to who we are and where we call home.

Our lands and waters are also fundamental to a dynamic and growing economy in Kentucky. Healthy and abundant lands and waters are the foundation of many of Kentucky's signature industries, including outdoor recreation, tourism, agriculture, forestry, and bourbon.

Unfortunately, Kentucky's investment in the conservation and stewardship of our lands and waters falls far short of the need and significantly behind our neighboring states. This lack of investment threatens our beloved outdoor traditions and vital sectors of our economy.

Natural and Working Lands: An Economic Foundation for Kentucky

- Land conservation supports a growing tourism and outdoor recreation economy. For example, visitors to Kentucky Trail Towns have access to some of the best outdoor amenities in the state, including hundreds of miles of trails, woods, and waters. Out of state visitors to Kentucky spend \$1.3 billion on recreation, accounting for 13 percent of all visitor spending.¹ This spending supports 12,400 jobs and \$315 million in wages.
- Hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching depend on publicly accessible lands. Some 4.3 million residents and visitors participate in wildlife recreation, spending \$11.2 billion on these activities.²
- Dominated by small family farms, agriculture is one of Kentucky's leading industries. Agriculture is responsible for \$49.6 billion of output, 272,000 jobs, and \$10.3 billion in wages annually.³ The forest sector contributes \$18.6 billion, 57,000 jobs, and total wages of \$3.9 billion annually.⁴ Both these industries are tied directly to the land, and loss of farmland and forestland threatens their long-term strength and viability.



- Kentucky is the birthplace of bourbon. And this iconic economic and tourism engine relies on Kentucky’s agricultural and forest lands and waters. The bourbon industry generates \$9 billion in output, supporting 23,100 jobs, and \$1.63 billion wages.⁵
- As the enclosed table demonstrates, Kentucky lags far behind its peers in providing the essential state investments in conserving its productive farmlands, working forests, and natural areas. Without new investment in land conservation, Kentucky risks losing economic opportunities, from nature-based tourism to agriculture to new industries focused on quality of life, to nearby states, most of which are already growing far faster than Kentucky.

Recent Progress and Call to Action

Recent strategic investments made by the Kentucky General Assembly show a growing recognition that conserving Kentucky’s lands and waters is not just a “nice to have” – but an essential investment in the state’s long-term prosperity.

The need to invest in and steward natural areas and farmlands has never been greater. Kentucky’s lands and waters are not just a connection to our past – they are essential parts of a vibrant and prosperous future. Simply put, land conservation matters to all Kentuckians. Our lands and waters define our Commonwealth, support our economy, and underpin our quality of life.

Kentucky Lags Far Behind Other States

State	Number of Conservation Funding Programs	Approximate Annual Amount
Texas	3	\$251,000,000
Tennessee	5	\$81,200,000
North Carolina	4	\$67,500,000
Arkansas	5	\$47,000,000
Ohio	1	\$37,500,000
Mississippi	3	\$24,500,000
Missouri	3	\$24,000,000
Georgia	2	\$20,000,000
Alabama	1	\$15,000,000
Virginia	3	\$14,400,000
Indiana	2	\$11,500,000
Kentucky	1	\$2,390,000

As the next biennium budget is developed, we strongly urge Kentucky’s leaders and decisionmakers at the General Assembly to make a significant and ongoing investment in land and water conservation. Present and future generations of Kentuckians will thank you for securing the healthy, vibrant, and prosperous future we all deserve.

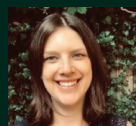
¹ Recreation includes visitor spending within the arts, entertainment, and recreation sub-sector. Tourism Economics. 2023 Economic Impact of Tourism in Kentucky. <https://www.kentuckytourism.com/industry/tourism-resources/2023-tourism-economic-impact>

² Expenditure estimates accounted for all items invested by participants for the activities during the year, ranging from trip-related expenses such as fuel, lodging and food, to equipment and clothing, to vehicles or land purchased. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. <https://www.fws.gov/program/national-survey-fishing-hunting-and-wildlife-associated-recreation-fhwar>

³ Balazs, Simona and Alison Davis. 2022. The Importance of Agriculture for Kentucky.

⁴ Forestry and Natural Resources Cooperative Extension Service, University of Kentucky. 2024. Kentucky Forest Sector Economic Contribution Report 2022-2023.

⁵ Kentucky Distillers Association. Bourbon 2023 Economic Impact. <https://kybourbon.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Bourbon-Boom-One-Pager-v5.pdf>



CONTACT
Heather Jeffs
Director of External Affairs, TNC Kentucky
heather.jeffs@tnc.org