Agenda

The 2026 Southeastern Public Interest Environmental Law Conference

https://www.spielconference.net/

Sewanee: The University of the South

https://new.sewanee.edu/

October 9-11, 2026

Our thanks goes out to our sponsors and donors for supporting this year's event:

Ernie Reed

This year's event is brought to you by the SPIEL 2026 Organizing Committee:

Jonathan Evans, Ph.D., Sewanee: The University of the South

Patrick Gauding, Ph.D., Sewanee: The University of the South

Heather Kleinfeld, Sewanee: The University of the South

Keegan Congleton, Sewanee: The University of the South

Davis Mounger, Tennessee Heartwood

Ashley Wilmes, Kentucky Resources Council

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Charline Whyte, Socially Responsible Agriculture Project

Byron Gary, Kentucky Resources Council

Vickey Wheeler, The Friends of Big Canoe Creek

Brian Gist, Southern Environmental Law Center

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Perrin de Jong, Private Practice

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FREE PARKING

In the lot behind Jessie Ball Dupont Library (building 7 below)

GUEST WIFI ACCESS

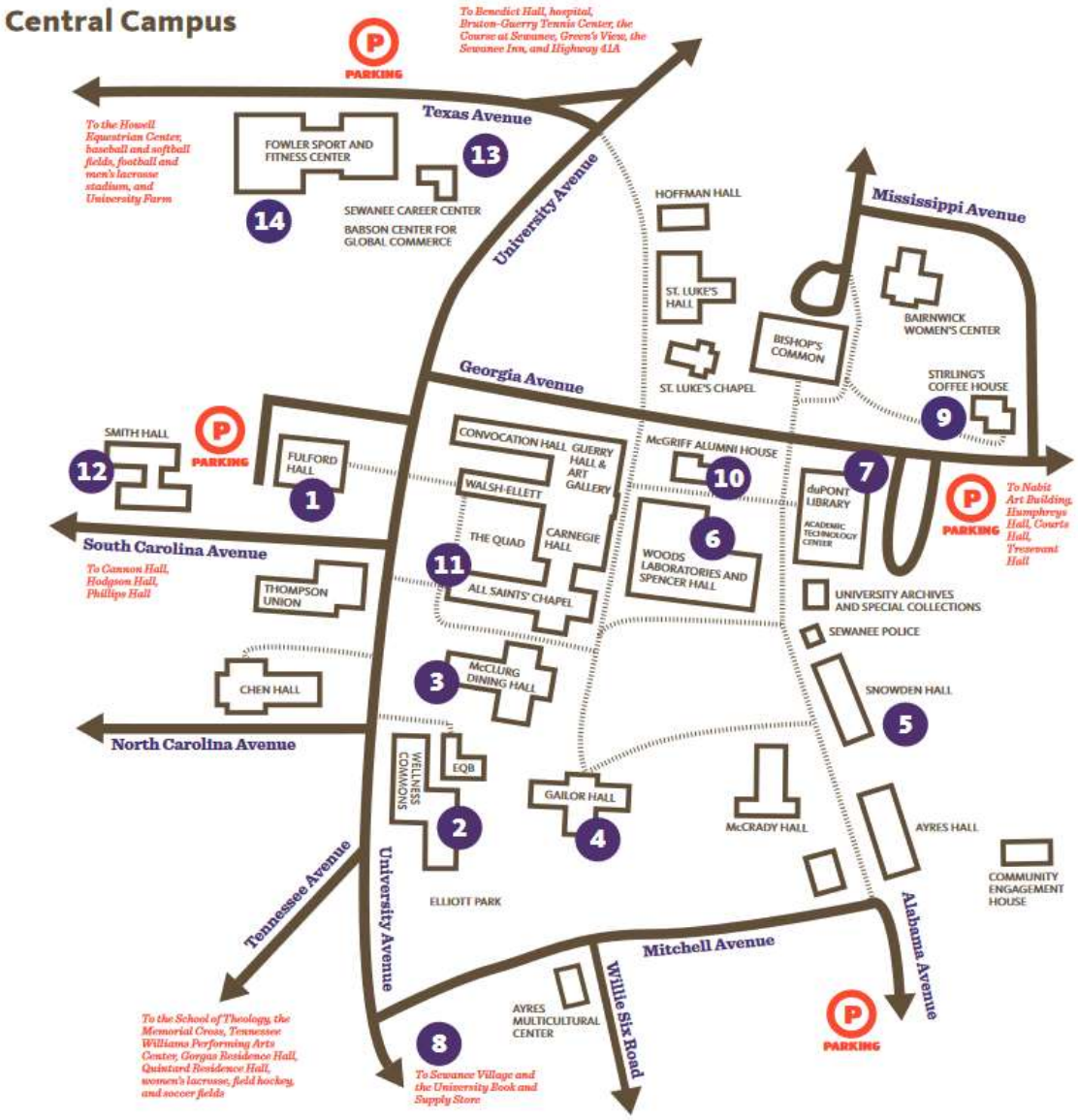
Connect to *'Sewanee-Guest'* and fill out the requested fields.

FIND PRESENTATION HANDOUTS HERE

https://mega.nz/folder/CrIG2QgA#YSY-gijV1tqNrKPw1PXMeQ

CAMPUS MAP

https://new.sewanee.edu/contact/campus-map/



Most on-campus conference events will take place in **6: Woods Laboratories and Spencer Hall; **4: Gailor Hall**; and **3: McClurg Dining Hall**. Free parking is behind **7: Dupont Library**.*

Helpful Navigational Hints:

- ✓ Sewanee is in the Central Time Zone. Chattanooga is in the Eastern Time Zone. Unless otherwise indicated, all times listed are in Central Time.

- ✓ The number before the location of the listed events corresponds to the number assigned to the building on the map found on page 4 of this agenda.

- ✓ The building identified as "6" on the map goes by multiple names. Often referred to as "Spencer Hall," it is also referred to as "*Woods Laboratories and Spencer Hall" and sometimes "Woods*."

- ✓ Gailor auditorium is found on the bottom floor of 4: Gailor Hall. When you walk into Gailor's front door, walk down the stairs and the auditorium is on your right.

Detailed SPIEL 2026 Schedule of Events

** **Central Time Zone:** Note that Sewanee is in the Central Time Zone. Unless otherwise indicated, all times listed are in Central Time.*

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 9th

3:00 – 6:00 pm Central Time/4:00 – 7:00 pm Eastern Time

***Field Trip*: The Domain as a Living Laboratory: Forest Ecology, Conservation, and Policy**

Jonathan P. Evans, Ph.D., Department of Biology, Sewanee: The University of the South, TN

This field trip will visit sites of long-term faculty-student research across the Domain, Sewanee's 13,000-acre campus and living laboratory. Stops will include a vernal pool, long-term forest monitoring plots, ancient hill cane and sassafras clones, and sites illustrating the effects of deer browsing, dogwood anthracnose, and changing patterns of oak regeneration, as well as the importance of mycorrhizal associations in sustaining forest ecosystems. These sites have generated peer-reviewed publications documenting the ecological processes and long-term changes we will observe firsthand. Along the way, we will discuss how these findings have shaped our understanding of forest ecology and how they inform forest management, conservation policy, and ecological stewardship in the region. Current research on the ecology of the forests of the Southeastern U.S. will be explored in two panels at SPIEL, and a panel on the fire ecology and land management of the Eastern forests of the U.S. will also be presented. To join the field trip, meet on campus at 3pm Central Time/4pm Eastern Time on Friday at the parking lot behind Dupont Library at 178 Georgia Avenue, Sewanee, TN 37383.

6:00 – 9:00 pm Central Time/7:00 – 10:00 pm Eastern Time

Friday Evening Welcome Social - As you arrive to town on Friday evening, please join us for a social gathering upstairs at local pub and restaurant *Shenanigans* from 6-9pm Central Time/7-10pm Eastern Time. After 9pm Central, enjoy the bar downstairs until closing time at 11pm. Shenanigans, 12595 Sollace M Freeman Hwy, Sewanee, TN 37375. Food and beverages are available for purchase all night at the upstairs and/or downstairs bars.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10th

7:00 am Central Time *(6: Spencer-Harris Commons, a.k.a. Spencer Hall atrium)*

Registration – Upon arrival, all attendees must check in at registration and collect their name tags. All volunteers must sign in and out and wear a volunteer badge. If you require a community service letter, please let us know. Attendance is free for students and Sewanee faculty members; please be prepared to provide your college ID. If you have not already paid your conference fees online, please complete payment at the registration table. A QR code linking to our secure payment portal will be available onsite; online payment is preferred. Cash and checks are also accepted. At the registration table, you may register and pay on-site, or visit the organization tabling area.

Convene and Create – Explore your artistic side next to registration through a variety of self motivated activities provided by an artist, naturalist, and writer. We will provide examples from nature that speak to natural processes and the importance of technical accuracy in creative writing and visual art. All day Saturday and Sunday until 3pm this area will be open, providing everyone an opportunity to convene and create.

Your Convene & Create Guides

Vickey Wheeler, Artist, AL

A life long artist and educator, she continues to explore the connectivity between Aesthetics and Environmental Integrity. Throughout her 36 year history with Friends of Big Canoe Creek, she has worked extensively with them on mission development, fundraising and communication and currently serves as president. The yearly Environmental Dinner she co-convenes, bringing the arts and sciences together will be celebrating 10 years in 2027. She recently started the Green Lady Luncheon to connect young women working in the ecological community.

Henry Hughes, Naturalist, AL

A trailblazer in forest restoration, Henry established a native tree planting program that continues today. He is executive director of Friends of Shades Creek, emeritus board member of the Cahaba River Society, and member of the advisory board of Friends of Big Canoe Creek. He is past president of the board of the Alabama Rivers Alliance and recipient of their 2024 River Hero award. He was director of education at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens until his retirement following a twenty-five year career in forestry in Alabama. He has been co-convener of The Gathering since 2015.

James Braziel, Writer, AL

James is the author of four books, most recently *Glass Cabin* (cowritten with his wife, Tina Mozelle Braziel). A meditation on hope, on frustration, and on people's places in the wilder parts of the world, *Glass Cabin* chronicles the thirteen years the Braziels spent building their home by hand on a ridge in rural Alabama. His collection of stories, *This Ditch-Walking Love*, was inspired by the people who live on Alabama's Cumberland Plateau. His novels, *Birmingham, 35 Miles* and *Snakeskin Road* follow a family in the aftermath of an environmental disaster in the future South. He currently teaches creative writing at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

8:00 - 9:15 am

I. **Data Center Track Session 1. Big Tech, Big Impacts: Community Tools for Managing the Data Center Boom** [CLE session] *(6: Woods-Blackman auditorium)*

A. **Panel Description**

As data center expansion accelerates, communities across the country are confronting urgent questions about energy demand, water use, land conversion, and other public health and environmental impacts. In the absence of strong regulatory protections at the state and federal level, local regulation and grassroots organizing are increasingly the first and last line of defense. This panel will survey emerging state legislation addressing data centers and break down different approaches to data center regulation at the local level, including strategies for ensuring local regulations withstand legal challenges. Panelists will also discuss what strategies have proven effective (and which haven't) to stop unchecked data center developments.

B. **Speakers**

Ashley Wilmes, Attorney and Executive Director, Kentucky Resources Council, KY

Ashley graduated from Centre College and then University of Oregon School of Law, earning a specialty certificate in Environment and Natural Resources Law. Before joining KRC, she practiced environmental law as a solo practitioner, served as a visiting lecturer at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law, and worked as in-house counsel for the environmental advocacy organization WildEarth Guardians. Ashley has represented organizations across the country on environmental matters and has argued cases before

the U.S. Courts of Appeal for the Ninth and Tenth Circuits. She is a former Chair of the Environmental Law Section of the Kentucky Bar Association and currently serves as a member of the Kentucky Environmental Education Council.

Audrey Ernstberger, Attorney, Kentucky Resources Council, KY

Audrey graduated from Centre College and earned her J.D. from the University of Louisville Louis D. Brandeis School of Law. Inspired by her energy law class and work as a Resilience Justice Fellow, she pursued an LL.M. in Energy and Environmental Law from The George Washington University Law School. Prior to joining KRC, Audrey worked as a Legislative Analyst for the Legislative Research Commission. Her advocacy experience includes winning a government benefits case on appeal as a Student Attorney at Harvard Legal Aid Bureau.

William Snow, Associate Attorney, Southern Environmental Law Center, GA

William is an Associate Attorney in the Georgia office of the Southern Environmental Law Center, where he spends most of his time addressing industrial pollution of Georgia's waters and helping communities respond thoughtfully and strategically to data center developments. He graduated from NYU School of Law, where he was articles editor of the NYU Environmental Law Journal. Originally, he is from Nashville, TN—where he interned for SELC during law school.

Trey Bussey, Senior Attorney, Southern Environmental Law Center, TN

Trey is a Senior Attorney in the Southern Environmental Law Center's Tennessee office. Trey's work focuses on energy and data centers. A former teacher and Peace Corps Volunteer, Trey received his law and undergraduate degrees from Georgetown University.

Chloe Allen, Associate Attorney, Southern Environmental Law Center, TN

Chloe is an Associate Attorney in the Tennessee office of the Southern Environmental Law Center, where she focuses on environmental justice, air, and energy issues. Chloe received a B.A. from Vanderbilt University and a J.D. from Vanderbilt University School of Law. She comes to SELC as the recipient of Vanderbilt Law School's George Barrett Social Justice Fellowship. Prior to SELC, Chloe was a National Park Service guide in Washington state and Virginia, and worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of the General Counsel's Juneau Field Office.

Charline Whyte, Attorney, Socially Responsible Agriculture Project, AL

Charline is a Senior Staff Attorney with the Socially Responsible Agriculture Project. She was born and raised in Costa Rica, where she earned degrees in Special Education and Natural Resource Management. After relocating to the United States, she obtained a J.D. from the Birmingham School of Law.

II. Small Grantwriting for Beginners *(4: Gailor auditorium)*

A. Panel Description

Many grassroots individuals and organizations rely on small grants to sustain their work. While the applications of grantors can vary, there are a few core skills that a writer needs to use to make theirs successful. While covering typical application formats and structures, this session will go into writing style and process, as well as common pitfalls to avoid. Large institutional grants are beyond the scope of this session.

B. Speaker

Davis Mounger, Director, Tennessee Heartwood, TN

Davis Mounger is the director of Tennessee Heartwood and public lands chair for the Tennessee Chapter of the Sierra Club. He began working on federal lands in his native Mississippi in 1993 and currently works on state and federal lands policy in Tennessee while teaching high school. He has conducted forest watch trainings in eight states. He is one of the SPIEL conference's founders.

9:30-10:45 am

III. Data Center Track Session 2. The Data Center Boom: Power, Pollution & Public Impacts [CLE session] *(6: Woods-Blackman auditorium)*

A. Panel Description

Impacts from data centers and associated demand growth go far beyond the local level. Utilities across the South (and the nation) have been seeking approvals from Public Utilities Commissions for massive gas buildout, raising concerns about increasing carbon intensity, cost-allocation, stranded assets, and potential impacts on existing ratepayers. At the same time state air permitting authorities have been proposing "minor" NSR permits for new gas plants, batteries of diesel backup generators, and extended coal plant lifetimes - if they get an application for a permit at all.

B. Speakers

Cassandra McCrae, Senior Attorney, Earthjustice, CA

Cassandra's practice largely consists of representing organizations in litigated state administrative proceedings on a variety of energy transition, equity, and affordability issues. Before joining Earthjustice in 2017, Cassandra was a Staff Attorney at Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid, where she was part of the environmental justice and housing justice practice groups. She clerked for the Honorable Robert C. Chambers in the Southern District of West Virginia and at the First Court of Appeals of Texas for Justice Rebeca Aizpuru Huddle, now at the Supreme Court of Texas. Cassandra earned her J.D. at The University of Texas School of Law, after working for several years for community-based organizations addressing legacy and ongoing impacts of coal and gas extraction in western Maryland and southwest Pennsylvania.

Keri Powell, Senior Attorney, Southern Environmental Law Center, GA

Keri is the Air Program Director at the Southern Environmental Law Center. Keri is widely recognized as one of the nation's leading Clean Air Act experts. She previously served as Senior Clean Air Act Attorney for the U.S. EPA in Atlanta and as an advisor to U.S. EPA's Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance in Washington, D.C. Her legal career includes litigation of impactful Clean Air Act cases during her tenure with Earthjustice in Washington, D.C. and New York, and on behalf of Sierra Club, Environmental Integrity Project, Environmental Defense Fund, and others while in private practice.

Mary Cromer, Attorney, Appalachian Citizens' Law Center, KY

Mary joined ACLC's staff in October 2008 to expand ACLC's community-based environmental law work. Mary represents individuals in Southwest Virginia and Eastern Kentucky on a variety of environmental justice issues related to the legacy costs of coal mining, including landowners' rights issues, toxic waste disposal, and safe drinking water. Mary has served on the Virginia Governor's Advisory Council on Environmental Justice. Prior to joining ACLC, Mary worked as an Associate Attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center and clerked for the Honorable Glen Conrad of the United States District Court for the Western District of Virginia. She earned her J.D. magna cum laude from Washington & Lee University School of Law. Mary and her family live on a farm in Wise County, VA, that has been in her family since the 1840s.

Byron L. Gary, Senior Attorney, Kentucky Resource Council, KY

Byron is a Senior Attorney at KRC. He holds a degree in political science and philosophy from the University of Louisville, and a J.D. from the University of Louisville Brandeis School of Law. During his time in law school, Byron was the President of the Environmental Law and Land Use Society and Co-Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Animal and Environmental Law. Before joining KRC, he worked at the Louisville Public Defender and the Louisville Metro Air Pollution Control District, where he was responsible for regulating development. He is the current Chair of the Environmental Law Section of the Kentucky Bar Association, and serves on the Boards for the University of Louisville Superfund Center and Center for Integrative Environmental Health Sciences Community Engagement Cores.

IV. A Boatload of Dam Work Ahead: How and Why to Engage in the Upcoming Wave of Hydropower Licensings in the Southeast [CLE session] *(4: Gailor auditorium)*

A. Panel Description

Southeastern rivers support extraordinary biodiversity, including some of the highest concentrations of freshwater fishes, mussels, crayfishes, and amphibians in North America. Yet many of these rivers are fragmented by hydropower dams that block fish passage, alter natural flows, degrade water quality, reduce habitat availability, and diminish river access and recreation opportunities for paddlers. Over the next decade, nearly 40 hydropower projects in the Southeast will come up for relicensing by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. These federal regulatory licensings each present a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve environmental, recreational, safety, and community conditions on the affected river and to restore aquatic species and habitat. At the same time, proposals for new conventional and pumped storage hydropower projects continue to emerge across the region with federal licensing processes determining whether our rivers become further fragmented and degraded. This presentation will provide an overview of federal licensing processes, including the stakeholders involved and the federal statutory and regulatory frameworks at play (Federal Power Act, Clean Water Act, National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act, National Historic Preservation Act). Additionally, the presentation will cover examples of litigation in hydropower licensing, as well as developments in national policy affecting hydropower licensing that include changes in NEPA categorical exclusions applicable to hydropower, efforts to improve the license surrender process, and the implications of EPA's recent CWA § 401 rulemaking. Presenters will bring perspectives on hydropower licensing work from New England and the

Pacific Northwest, as well as from the Southeast. Attendees will be equipped with the knowledge and resources to prepare for and engage in hydropower licensings that affect southeastern rivers and the communities, human and non-human, that depend on them.

B. Speakers

Jack West, Attorney and Special Projects Director, Alabama Rivers Alliance, AL

Jack is an attorney with the Alabama Rivers Alliance (ARA) where his work focuses on addressing the impacts hydropower and non-powered dams have on rivers and the associated human and non-human communities. Jack has engaged in Federal Energy Regulatory Commission hydropower licensings across Alabama, including on the Tallapoosa, Coosa, Tombigbee, Black Warrior, Alabama, and Pea rivers. He also works on TVA hydropower issues in the northern third of Alabama. For the past six years Jack has represented ARA on the steering committee of the national Hydropower Reform Coalition, a coalition of organizations working to protect, enhance, and restore the country's rivers, watersheds, and communities affected by hydropower operations. Prior to joining ARA, Jack worked as in-house counsel for an Alabama-based solar developer and in corporate private practice.

Bob Nasdor, Attorney and Northeast Stewardship & Legal Director, American Whitewater, MA

Bob is American Whitewater's Northeast Stewardship & Legal Director based in the Boston area. Bob joined American Whitewater in 2012 after devoting much of his career to public interest advocacy to helping vulnerable low-income individuals and families struggle to meet their basic needs for food, housing, and security. Through this advocacy, Bob came to view the law as an effective tool for those seeking justice, and attended Rutgers Law School to become a more effective advocate, working in legal aid as a housing advocate in New Jersey and directing a legal aid program in Massachusetts. Whitewater kayaking became a passion for Bob later on, and like all of us, he was drawn to the connection to the outdoors, the excitement of the river, and the welcoming paddling community. Through his work at American Whitewater, Bob has specialized on hydropower dam licensing through the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, having worked to expand river access, recreation opportunities, and river restoration at nearly 50 dams in the Northeast. In 2024, Bob launched American Whitewater's Deadbeat Dam Law Project to address the growing problem of hydropower dam abandonment and the unwillingness of regulating agencies to require deadbeat dam removal. On the national scene, Bob leads the effort to protect Clean Water Act requirements that hydropower dam owners meet state water quality

standards. Bob also supports American Whitewater's other legal advocacy needs across the organization.

Jacob Bernal, Associate Director of Northwest Hydropower Reform, American Rivers, ID

Jacob is the Associate Director of Northwest Hydropower Reform for American Rivers and the Hydropower Reform Coalition. He participates in hydropower relicensings across Idaho, Oregon, and Washington to restore salmon habitat, improve water quality, expand recreational access, and uphold the treaty rights of Sovereign Nations. As a coalition coordinator, Jacob bridges conservation organizations, industry, government agencies, Sovereign Nations, and dedicated individuals to ensure river protection remains at the forefront of hydropower reform.

11:00 am - 12:00 pm -- KEYNOTE ADDRESS/PLENARY SESSION

Mystery, Commitment, Community, and Hope *(6: Woods-Blackman auditorium)*

Mark will share his journey through the grassroots environmental movement of the Deep South and how his path has illuminated and cultivated his motivation for justice. His stories will include insights learned from his successes and failures as he helped create the scaffolding of the grassroots environmental movement in Alabama and how the successes and his Alabama community in the fight for clean air, clean water, and environmental justice have given him a spirit of optimism and hope. It will be fun.

Rev. Mark Johnston, Retired Episcopal Priest, Justice and Care of Creation Entrepreneur, AL

Rev. Mark Johnston Graduated from the University of the South at Sewanee in 1972 and graduated at the St. Luke's School of Theology at Sewanee in 1980. He worked in churches in Fayette, Tuscaloosa, and in the Black Belt before becoming the Executive Director at Camp McDowell in 1990. He grew McDowell from a summer camp with 4 full time employees to a very large and diverse year-round program with over 50 full time employees and over 125 seasonal employees. McDowell has become the largest camp and conference center in the Episcopal Church. He also started the West Alabama Food Bank while in Tuscaloosa in 1996. He founded GASP (The Greater-Birmingham Alliance to Stop Pollution) in 2009 alongside Kirsten Bryant and Nelson Brooke. His work has awarded him Alabama's Outstanding Young Religious Leader in 1981, ARC State Volunteer of the Year in 1983 for work with people who have disabilities, The James Dockery Southern Environmental Leadership Award in 1999 The Alabama Rivers Alliance River Hero in 2009, and The Forest Stewardship Certification by the Alabama Forestry Commission in 2011. He has served as GASP's Treasurer and currently runs the business that he started in 1986, Home Renovation & Real Estate Company.

12:00 - 1:30 pm -- Lunch

Lunch – We recommend sampling the convenient, diverse, quality dining options at Sewanee's on-campus McClurg Dining Hall, but off-campus dining options also exist on and around University Avenue.

Caucuses – Meet in the dining hall or in designated campus classrooms for self-organized discussion groups, mini-presentations, strategy sessions, or to launch new projects or coalitions. To organize and promote your caucus ahead of the conference, fill out this form

by October 1st, and your caucus will be posted to our website by October 5th. See the whiteboard by Registration to organize a caucus on-site and to learn about the caucuses you can attend.

1:30-2:15 pm

V. Data Center Track Session 3. The Civil Rights and EJ Roots of Local Data Center Advocacy *(6: Woods-Blackman auditorium)*

A. Panel Description

Local data center advocacy-regardless of the demographics of the local community—owes a huge debt to civil rights and environmental justice advocates, who have been struggling for decades against the siting of undesirable land uses in predominantly Black and brown communities across the country. In the early 1990s, environmental justice advocates developed the 17 Principles of Environmental Justice and the Jemez Principles of Democratic Organizing. These two sets of principles provide the foundation for the NAACP's Frontline Framework Community Data Center Guiding Principles, which were developed in Memphis with input from NAACP and other advocates from around the country who are fighting data centers in their communities. This presentation will describe the potential for powerful policy changes being shaped by local data center advocacy in the South, and trace the roots of this advocacy in the civil rights and environmental justice movements. Embracing civil rights and EJ principles and strategies has the potential to grow a new, bipartisan environmental movement that is responsive to directly-affected communities.

B. Speakers

Amanda Garcia, Senior Attorney, Southern Environmental Law Center, TN

Amanda is a senior attorney in the Tennessee office and the Data Center Project Leader at the Southern Environmental Law Center. Amanda guides SELC's work addressing the impacts of data centers across the region and works directly alongside communities to help build a more resilient, just, and livable future in the South. Amanda's legal practice centers on energy, air, and environmental justice. She led the SELC team that helped the southwest Memphis community defeat the Byhalia crude oil pipeline and co-led the SELC team that supported community opposition to xAI's Colossus 1 data center in southwest Memphis. Amanda regularly collaborates with a dedicated coalition of local community leaders to create more environmental justice in predominantly Black communities in

Memphis. In 2025, SELC's work in Memphis was recognized with Young, Gifted & Green's EJ Ally x Pioneer award. Amanda graduated from Stanford University with distinction and from NYU School of Law *magna cum laude*. She clerked in the United States District Court for the Central District of California.

Yolonda Spinks, Environmental Justice Policy Advocate, Southern Environmental Law Center, NC

Yolonda is the Environmental Justice Policy Advocate with the Southern Environmental Law Center. In her role, she collaborates with environmental justice leaders and partners across the Southeast and works with staff on projects that build relationships, strengthen advocacy efforts, and support communities disproportionately impacted by environmental harm tied to disinvestment, income inequality, and systemic racism. A fourth-generation resident of South Memphis — a predominantly Black community long burdened by industrial pollution and cancer rates reported to be significantly higher than the national average — Yolonda brings both lived experience and a deep commitment to advancing environmental justice and community centered solutions.

Em Coakley, Climate & Energy Organizer, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, KY

Em (they/them) is a Climate & Energy Organizer with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth. At KFTC, they work on Public Service Commission cases, fight hyperscale data centers, organize rural electric co-ops, help build resilient communities, and push for energy democracy from farms to the mountains and everywhere in between.

VI. Forest Science Track Session 1. The Fate of Remaining Intact Upland Forest on the Southern Cumberland Plateau: Revisiting a 1981 Baseline. *(4: Gailor auditorium)*

A. Presentation Description

The upland forests of the Cumberland Plateau have long been shaped by competing land-use priorities, including surface coal mining, conversion of native hardwood forests to loblolly pine plantations, industrial timber harvesting, residential development, and, more recently, proposals to create pine savanna habitat. In the early 2000s, the Landscape Analysis Laboratory at the University of the South used aerial photography and satellite imagery to map intact upland forest across a 614,000-acre, seven-county region of the southern Cumberland Plateau, establishing a 1981 baseline against which subsequent forest loss could be measured. That work documented the loss of approximately 20% of

native forest between 1981 and 2003 and helped bring the issue to the attention of state officials. In this presentation, I extend that analysis by asking how much of the forest that was intact in 1981 remains today. Stands that have remained unconverted for more than four decades now represent some of the region's most biologically significant remaining forests—an increasingly scarce conservation resource. I will discuss the biological significance of these forests, present a follow-up assessment tracking their status since 2003, and consider the implications for conservation priorities, forest management, and land-use policy on the Cumberland Plateau.

B. Speaker

Jonathan P. Evans, Ph.D., Department of Biology, Sewanee: The University of the South, TN

Dr. Evans is a Professor of Biology and the Director of the Sewanee Herbarium at the University of the South. His research in plant ecology focuses on plant population dynamics and the processes that determine the composition and structure of plant communities over time and across landscapes. He is specifically interested in the role of clonal growth as a mechanism for population persistence in plant communities. Through the use of long-term research plots, he also studies land-use history and other drivers of forest change on the southern Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee. Evans leads University efforts to promote landscape–level conservation of biodiversity across the Cumberland Plateau region. He is one of the SPIEL conference's founders.

2:30-3:45 pm

VII. Clean Water Under Attack: Continued Rollbacks and Legal Updates for Protecting our Waterway and Wetlands [CLE session] *(6: Woods-Blackman auditorium)*

A. Panel Description

The Clean Water Act's regulatory landscape continues to shift, with major changes under consideration that could reshape federal and state authority over waterways and wetlands. This session will examine EPA and the Army Corps' evolving definition of "waters of the United States" (WOTUS), including the agencies' newly announced Supplemental Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, and recent cases interpreting *Sackett* and *Maui*. Panelists will also discuss EPA's proposed changes to Section 401 water quality certifications, which would narrow the scope of state and Tribal review of federally permitted projects. The panel will

break down what these rollbacks mean for protecting wetlands, streams, and water quality under the Clean Water Act.

B. Speakers

Ashley Wilmes, Attorney and Executive Director, Kentucky Resources Council, KY

Ashley graduated from Centre College and then University of Oregon School of Law, earning a specialty certificate in Environment and Natural Resources Law. Before joining KRC, she practiced environmental law as a solo practitioner, served as a visiting lecturer at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law, and worked as in-house counsel for the environmental advocacy organization WildEarth Guardians. Ashley has represented organizations across the country on environmental matters and has argued cases before the U.S. Courts of Appeal for the Ninth and Tenth Circuits. She is a former Chair of the Environmental Law Section of the Kentucky Bar Association and currently serves as a member of the Kentucky Environmental Education Council.

Albert Ettinger, Attorney, Private Practice, IL

Albert is currently in solo practice. From 1997 until 2010, he held the position of Senior Staff Attorney at the Environmental Law & Policy Center of the Midwest. He has degrees from the University of Michigan (BGS 1975), (J.D. 1979), and is a member of the Illinois State Bar Association and the Chicago Bar Association. Mr. Ettinger's work since 1997 has focused on protecting water quality and implementation of the Clean Water Act. In doing this, Mr. Ettinger represented numerous environmental organizations in legal and regulatory matters, including the Sierra Club, Friends of the Chicago River, NRDC, Alliance for the Great Lakes, Mississippi River Collaborative, Prairie Rivers Network, Hoosier Environmental Council, Iowa Environmental Council, Upper Missouri Waterkeepers, and Kentucky Waterways Alliance. This work has involved development of water quality standards, work on animal feeding operations, review of permits for sewage treatment plants and other point sources, mining issues, lawsuits against U.S. EPA, citizen suits against dischargers alleged to have violated their NPDES permits and suits against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers relating to Corps' activities under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. Mr. Ettinger has also represented clients in numerous cases brought under NEPA and the Clean Air Act.

VIII. Playing the Long Game: The Polluter's Project to Dismantle New Source Review [CLE Session] *(4: Gailor auditorium)*

A. Panel Description

Presenters will discuss the decades-long project backed by polluters to dismantle the Clean Air Act's Major New Source Review (NSR) rules, undermining permitting for these large sources of air pollution. From the "NSR Reform" program of the early 2000s, to the "Project Emissions Accounting" rule of 2020 and the proposal to redefine "Begin Actual Construction" earlier this year, industry has been on a winning streak across administrations to dismantle the rules that govern when new sources and modifications require major NSR permits, and the accompanying stricter controls. Individual sources are now using these changes to evade NSR—and stricter controls. The issue has become especially significant in the southeast due to the rush to build data centers. Examples to be discussed include the xAI citizen suit in Mississippi (Memphis area), TVA's construction of two new Tennessee gas plants pursuant to "minor" NSR permits despite admitting that the plants will be major and required to obtain PSD permits. Ongoing changes at the LG&E Mill Creek Generating Station will be discussed. Minor NSR examples abound, as well—a "pop up" power plant serving a data center in Georgia fully constructed without waiting for its minor NSR permit. These rules and examples from across the Southeast will be discussed by these attorneys with decades of experience both in the nonprofit and regulatory spheres.

B. Speakers

Keri Powell, Senior Attorney, Southern Environmental Law Center, GA

Keri is the Air Program Director at the Southern Environmental Law Center. Keri is widely recognized as one of the nation's leading Clean Air Act experts. She previously served as Senior Clean Air Act Attorney for the U.S. EPA in Atlanta and as an advisor to U.S. EPA's Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance in Washington, D.C. Her legal career includes litigation of impactful Clean Air Act cases during her tenure with Earthjustice in Washington, D.C. and New York, and on behalf of Sierra Club, Environmental Integrity Project, Environmental Defense Fund, and others while in private practice.

Byron L. Gary, Senior Attorney, Kentucky Resource Council, KY

Byron is a Senior Attorney at KRC. He holds a degree in political science and philosophy from the University of Louisvillle, and a J.D. from the University of Louisville Brandeis School of Law. During his time in law school, Byron was the President of the Environmental

Law and Land Use Society and Co-Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Animal and Environmental Law. Before joining KRC, he worked at the Louisville Public Defender and the Louisville Metro Air Pollution Control District, where he was responsible for regulating development. He is the current Chair of the Environmental Law Section of the Kentucky Bar Association, and serves on the Boards for the University of Louisville Superfund Center and Center for Integrative Environmental Health Sciences Community Engagement Cores.

3:45 - 5:00 pm

Free Time – Sewanee's 13,000 acre Domain offers extensive recreational opportunities, including camping options.

5:00 - 6:30 pm

Environmental Film Screening – (*6: Woods-Blackman auditorium*) Please join us for a special screening of Southern Exposure Films, short documentaries from the Alabama Rivers Alliance and their partners throughout the Southeast. In this collection, we learn more about the beloved *Hymenocallis coronaria* (or, Cahaba Lily, to those who know) and meet the folks who have found themselves rooted in the river, spending their summer days protecting this unique plant and the wild waters it calls home. We shine a light on the exciting possibilities of harnessing the sun to meet increasing demand, and the complicated choices that come with it. Can we make room for solar without giving up the wetlands, waterways and wildlife that make the Southeast special? We confront the environmental impacts and costs of AI as massive data centers pop up across the Southeast, threatening to drain communities of precious water and energy. And we are taken along the Tombigbee River to the small town of McIntosh, where we meet the families who have lived for generations in the shadow of massive chemical plants. Residents claim they have been sickened through decades of exposure to legacy chemicals and modern leaks, while the rollback of environmental protections leaves them with even fewer options to protect their health and community. Stick around after the screening for a discussion with Alabama Rivers Alliance. See trailers of the films at https://alabamarivers.org/se-sewanee/

6:00 – 8:00 pm

Dinner -You can sample the convenient, diverse, quality dining options at Sewanee's on-campus McClurg Dining Hall (the dining hall is open 7am-8pm), but off-campus dining options also exist along University Avenue.

7:30 pm – Late

Party – (11: *Convocation Hall on the corner of University and Georgia Avenues*) Join us for fun and refreshments with Chattanooga's own Rock and Soul outfit (Up) The Dose!

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 11th

7:30 am *(6: Spencer-Harris Commons, a.k.a. Spencer Hall atrium)*

Registration – For anyone arriving for the first time on Sunday, you must check in and collect your name tag. All volunteers must sign in and out and wear a volunteer badge. Attendance is free for students and Sewanee faculty members; please be prepared to provide your college ID. If you have not already paid your conference fees online, please complete payment at the registration table. A QR code linking to our secure payment portal will be available onsite; online payment is preferred. Cash and checks are also accepted. At the registration table, you may register and pay on-site, or visit the organization-tabling area.

Convene and Create – Explore your artistic side next to registration through a variety of self motivated activities provided by an artist, naturalist, and writer. We will provide examples from nature that speak to natural processes and the importance of technical accuracy in creative writing and visual art. All day Saturday and Sunday until 3pm this area will be open, providing everyone an opportunity to convene and create.

Your Convene & Create Guides

Vickey Wheeler, Artist, AL

A life long artist and educator, she continues to explore the connectivity between Aesthetics and Environmental Integrity. Throughout her 36 year history with Friends of Big Canoe Creek, she has worked extensively with them on mission development, fundraising and communication and currently serves as president. The yearly Environmental Dinner she co-convenes, bringing the arts and sciences together will be celebrating 10 years in 2027. She recently started the Green Lady Luncheon to connect young women working in the ecological community.

Henry Hughes, Naturalist, AL

A trailblazer in forest restoration, Henry established a native tree planting program that continues today. He is executive director of Friends of Shades Creek, emeritus board member of the Cahaba River Society, and member of the advisory board of Friends of Big Canoe Creek. He is past president of the board of the Alabama Rivers Alliance and recipient of their 2024 River Hero award. He was director of education at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens until his retirement following a twenty-five year career in forestry in Alabama. He has been co-convener of The Gathering since 2015.

James Braziel, Writer, AL

James is the author of four books, most recently *Glass Cabin* (cowritten with his wife, Tina Mozelle Braziel). A meditation on hope, on frustration, and on people's places in the wilder parts of the world, *Glass Cabin* chronicles the thirteen years the Braziels spent building their home by hand on a ridge in rural Alabama. His collection of stories, *This Ditch-Walking Love*, was inspired by the people who live on Alabama's Cumberland Plateau. His novels, *Birmingham, 35 Miles* and *Snakeskin Road* follow a family in the aftermath of an environmental disaster in the future South. He currently teaches creative writing at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

8:30 – 9:45 am

I. Conservation at the Water's Edge: the Confluence of Science, Community, Policy, and Law to Conserve Riparian Habitat in Rapidly Urbanizing Regions

[CLE session] *(6: Woods-Blackman auditorium)*

A. Panel Description

Panel members will use the case study method to explore the complex interplay of science, community, policy, and law to conserve riparian habitat in rapidly urbanizing regions. Specifically, we will describe and evaluate an innovative conservation program initiated in 1990 for the Econlockhatchee (Econ) River in Central Florida. The program employs a multipronged, intergovernmental approach utilizing both regulatory and non-regulatory tools. The Econ program is distinctive because it establishes riparian protection zones (RHPZ) primarily for the purpose of conserving wildlife habitat. The program is implemented through regional water management agency regulations and local government comprehensive plan provisions and ordinances. The program applies to both wetlands and uplands within riparian buffer zones on both private and public lands. The government entities use several mechanisms to reduce the likelihood of successful 5th amendment takings challenges, including rebuttable presumptions, clustering, transferrable development rights, and mitigation. Fee simple land acquisition and conservation easements also play an important role in conserving large tracts of riparian lands. Focal areas include the policy development process, the scientific and legal basis for protection zones, innovative use of comprehensive planning, regulatory, and land acquisition tools, and administrative and judicial challenges. Elements of this unique approach may serve as a useful model for other jurisdictions seeking to protect riparian

areas. Additional considerations to be discussed include the development of a wildlife crossings framework to work in conjunction with the RHPZ projections as well as success stories from similar corridors in Florida. We will also summarize work and services provided by researchers at the Center for Applied Geospatial Data Science (CAGDS), University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC), involving a spatial analysis of land cover composition within the riparian zone proposed for management in the initial study. GIS and spatial analysis are useful tools to establish, administer, and evaluate conservation programs.

B. Speakers

John Tucker, Attorney and Professor of Environmental Science, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, TN

John is an Environmental Science Professor and former head and grad program coordinator in the Biology, Geology, and Environmental Science Department at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He received an LL.M. in Environmental and Natural Resources Law from Lewis and Clark, a J.D. from the University of Florida (UF), and a B.S. in Biology from Stetson University. Current research relates to riparian habitat conservation and inter-basin water transfer regulation. John teaches courses in environmental law (pollution control, conservation, environmental justice, land use, and climate change). Law journal publications focus on pesticides, environmental ethics, ecosystem management, water resources, and biodiversity conservation. Previously, he worked at the UF College of Law, on environmental and land use projects for government and nonprofit entities in Florida, Poland, and Brazil. Prior to law school he was a biological scientist for UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, where he co-authored several scientific articles focused on using aquatic macrophytes to renovate contaminated agricultural wastewater. A 5th generation Floridian, John spent much of his youth and early adult years in the woods and waters of Central Florida, where he developed a keen appreciation of nature yet experienced firsthand the impacts of relentless population growth and development. Now, John enjoys the streams and forests of Tennessee with his family but worries about development trends here.

Jason Houck, Ecological Practice Director, Ardurra Group, Orlando, FL

Jason serves as the Ecological Practice Director for Ardurra in Orlando, Florida. He received his BS (2001) and MS (2003) at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga under John Tucker where he studied the effects of acid mine drainage on plethodontid salamanders. His current work is focused on landscape ecology and roadway corridor analyses and permeability pertaining to wildlife movement with particular emphasis on

large-ranging mammals such as the Florida black bear and Florida panther. Jason and his FDOT colleagues recently developed a methodology used for assessing and applying state and federal wetland mitigation credit to the inclusion of wildlife crossings and other habitat connectivity enhancements that was published in the journal Ecosphere in 2023 and adopted in the FDOT Panther Conservation Plan in 2024. While still considering himself a native Tennessean, Jason spends his free time traveling with his family, chasing redfish in the Indian River lagoon, and searching for the world's best fish sandwich.

Nyssa Hunt, Assistant GIS Director, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, TN

Nyssa's years of research experience thus far have been gained from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, while exploring the many avenues of their Environmental Science program. In 2014, she earned her B.S. in Environmental Science with a concentration in Geographic and Cartographic Sciences and minors in Computer Science, Biology, and Geography, all of which allowed great immersion into fieldwork and the beginning phases of intensive GIS modeling. In Summer 2018, she earned an M.S. in Environmental Science, in which her thesis research focused on developing and assessing predictive spatial distribution models for an amphibian species listed as both rare and vulnerable in the state of Tennessee. From then onward, Nyssa has continued to work with conservation, recreation, and agricultural analysis for the greater Chattanooga region, collaborates with faculty, staff, and students on projects, and assists community organizations with GIS needs. She enjoys exploring new GIS technologies in machine and deep learning to go further with conservation GIS, and finding solutions to geospatial challenges. Additionally, she is a licensed Part 107 UAV pilot and assists on research projects in need of drone/UAV flights and analysis.

Emma Omeragic, Honors Undergraduate Student, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, TN

Emma is a student in the Brock Scholars Program at the Honors College of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. She is earning a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Science with a concentration in Biodiversity, Conservation, and Natural Resources and is passionate about conserving biodiversity and protecting natural habitats. Emma received an Honors College Student Research Fellowship sponsoring her involvement in the assessment of the Econ River conservation program.

Renee Radford, Undergraduate Student, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, TN

Renee is a senior pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Science with a concentration in Biodiversity, Conservation, and Natural Resources, a Minor in Geographic Information Science, and a Bachelor of Arts in Modern and Classical Languages and

Literatures: Spanish. Renee was selected the 2026 Outstanding Senior for the B.S. in Environmental Science: Biodiversity, Conservation and Natural Resources program by departmental faculty and the UTC Student Government Association. The award reflects extraordinary academic achievement (nearly perfect GPA) and contributions to her academic program. In addition to her studies and support on this project, Renee also works at a nonprofit called Waterways that advocates and funds watershed restoration projects and raises awareness on the importance of preserving water quality.

II. Federal Lands Fire Policy in the East *(4: Gailor auditorium)*

A. Panel Description

Fire is one of many ecological factors that shape forest and grassland structure. In recent decades, federal land managers have used fire extensively as a management tool in Eastern forests. While fire management has an important role to play in certain forest communities, there has also been abuse of fire ecology to justify timber targets in others. This presentation will review the scientific evidence supporting these policies and how these policies have played out on the ground. We will conclude with a discussion of how targeted burn programs, along with other factors, can play a role in some forest communities in promoting biodiversity and long-term forest health.

B. Speakers

Tom Nickell, Ph.D., Retired Neuroscientist, KY

Tom was born in Between the Rivers--now *Land Between the Lakes*--and lived there until his family was displaced by the TVA acquisition of the area in the 1960s. The farm had been in the family since Jeremiah Nickell settled in the region in the 1790s. Tom became interested in Fire Science when LBL management implemented plans to convert the forested peninsula into an Oak Savanna, its supposed pre-settlement condition. Dr. Nickell holds a Ph.D. in Physiology and Biophysics from the University of Kentucky and conducted research in the physiology and pharmacology of the olfactory system at the University of Cincinnati. He is now retired.

Davis Mounger, Director, Tennessee Heartwood, TN

Davis is the director of Tennessee Heartwood and public lands chair for the Tennessee Chapter of the Sierra Club. He began working on federal lands in his native Mississippi in 1993 and currently works on state and federal lands policy in Tennessee while teaching

high school. He has conducted forest watch trainings in eight states. He is one of the SPIEL conference's founders.

10:00 - 11:15 pm

III. Forever Fields? Biosolids, PFAS, and Tennessee's Next Environmental Law Frontier [CLE session] *(4: Gailor auditorium)*

A. Panel Description

Tennessee is entering a pivotal moment in how it manages biosolids, land application, and emerging contaminants such as PFAS. This CLE presentation will give attorneys, policymakers, advocates, and stakeholders a concise overview of the legal, scientific, and practical challenges surrounding biosolids in Tennessee, including the state and federal regulatory landscape, recent EPA and TDEC developments, Tennessee legislation, and policy options for increasing testing, transparency, and accountability. The program will examine new Tennessee Class B biosolids data generated under the updated permit, what that data reveals and leaves unanswered, and the challenges of using incomplete or complex data for legal and policy decision-making. It will also highlight the farmer perspective, including liability, testing concerns, and support for contaminated land, before concluding with the role of the newly formed interdisciplinary Tennessee Biosolids Coalition in advancing research, advocacy, and practical policy solutions.

B. Speakers

Elise Karpinski, Attorney, Harpeth Conservancy, TN

Elise serves as Director of Tennessee Water Policy, where she leads Harpeth Conservancy's policy and advocacy work across the state. In this role, she advances systemic change by collaborating with state and local officials, coalitions, community partners, and other leaders on statewide conservation campaigns and water policy initiatives. Elise is an attorney and registered lobbyist in Tennessee. Born and raised in Asheville, North Carolina, Elise is a seventh-generation Appalachian mountaineer. Coming from a family of educators and farmers, she has a deep personal commitment to protecting water, land, and the communities that depend on them.

Dan Firth, Ph.D., Analytical Chemist, Eastern Tennessee State University, TN

Dr. Firth is an analytical chemist and adjunct faculty member at East Tennessee State University. Driven by a commitment to environmental stewardship, he volunteers with the Tennessee Chapter of the Sierra Club and various nonprofits, applying his scientific background to develop policy and solutions for solid waste management and its resulting pollution. A resident of Kingsport, TN, Dan is an avid outdoorsman who explores the region of northeast Tennessee and southwest Virginia. His commitment extends to local conservation through his role as an active trail maintainer with the Tennessee Eastman Hiking and Canoeing Club and the Trail Gorillas, where he maintains sections of the Appalachian Trail and trails at Bays Mountain Park.

Jess Wilson, Tennessee Policy Advisor, Southeast Tennessee Young Farmers, TN

Jess grew up on a dairy farm in central New York state and studied sustainable agriculture at Sterling College in Vermont before following her love to southeast Tennessee where she has grown vegetables, chickens, goats, sheep, children, and community organizations for the past 22 years. In addition to farming and some side hustles she currently serves as a TN Policy Advisor for Southeast Tennessee Young Farmers, an organization that she helped to found. She is passionate about building soil, building community, and ensuring a future for agriculture (and humanity).

IV. Grassroots Permit Advocacy Workshop: Building Stronger Records Across Permit Programs Through Two Coal Mining Case Studies *(6: Woods-Blackman auditorium)*

A. Panel Description

People challenging wastewater, industrial, development, mining, stream, and other environmental permits often face the same basic problem: the current public notice shows only one part of a much larger project history. This workshop is designed for advocates working in many permitting contexts. Using two coal mining matters as case studies, the presenters will show how to trace related approvals across agencies, obtain and organize prior records, compare agency conclusions with underlying data, identify unresolved issues, and develop focused comments that preserve options for further action. Mr. Ettinger will open with the Pond Creek underground longwall mine case in southern Illinois, drawing on comments and an appeal concerning a proposed National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System Permit concerning large-scale pumping and discharge of saline groundwater to Pond Creek and the Big Muddy River. The case raised Tier 1 and Tier 2

antidegradation, impaired waters, chloride and sulfate loading, conductivity, reasonable potential, mixing zones, monitoring and reporting, groundwater drawdown, subsidence, and enforcement history issues. This permit's history shows how advocates can connect technical evidence to permit requirements, build a durable administrative record, and preserve issues for appeal or enforcement. Ms. Sneed will present on Kentucky Resources Council's work on the Meadow Branch surface coal mining records in southeastern Kentucky. Meadow Branch is an Outstanding State Resource Water associated with blackside dace habitat. The case study follows the original permit, later modifications and renewals, and Meadow Branch #2, a separately listed expansion affecting the same mining-impacted watershed. It will show how mining permits, Kentucky Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permits, Section 401 water quality certifications, Section 404 authorizations, endangered species review, monitoring requirements, violations, reclamation status, and agency responses can divide a single project and watershed story across multiple records. Participants will see practical ways to use maps, monitoring data, species materials, agency files, and open records to test agency conclusions and identify missing information. Participants are encouraged to bring a permitting or enforcement problem from their community. During the final 25 minutes, the group will identify the relevant record, connected approvals, missing information, useful advocacy questions, possible next steps, and issues requiring program specific technical or legal expertise for audience members' examples.

B. Speakers

Albert Ettinger, Attorney, Private Practice, IL

Albert is an environmental attorney in solo practice and a former Senior Staff Attorney at the Environmental Law & Policy Center. Since 1997, his work has focused on water quality and the Clean Water Act. He has represented Sierra Club, NRDC, Alliance for the Great Lakes, Prairie Rivers Network, Kentucky Waterways Alliance, and other organizations in NPDES and Section 404 permitting, water quality standards, enforcement, and litigation. His notable Clean Water Act victories include Kentucky Waterways Alliance v. Johnson and Illinois EPA and Village of New Lenox v. Illinois Pollution Control Board. He also helped identify Clean Water Act and state law violations at Chicago's Trump Tower and represented Friends of the Chicago River and Sierra Club in litigation that resulted in a $4.8 million settlement, including $3 million for Chicago River habitat restoration and cooling system changes to protect aquatic life. River Network has recognized him as a River Hero for leadership on clean water and natural resource issues. He served as counsel for Sierra Club in the Pond Creek permit matter.

Lesley Sneed, Senior Scientist, Kentucky Resources Council, KY

Lesley is Senior Scientist at Kentucky Resources Council. She holds a B.S. in Agriculture and Natural Resources from Berea College and an M.S. in Aquatic Science from Kentucky State University. Her work focuses on the technical review of wastewater, mining, and Clean Water Act Section 401 certifications and Section 404 permits, with particular attention to water quality, threatened and endangered species, compliance, and enforcement. She uses monitoring data, maps, and agency records to develop technical comments for public interest advocacy. She previously worked for the Kentucky Division of Water writing 401 Certifications. A malacologist, she has surveyed freshwater mussels throughout the Midwest and Northeast and has broader field experience in stream habitat and water quality.

11:30 - 12:45 pm

V. A Tale of Two Wildernesses—Threats to the National Wilderness Preservation System [CLE session] *(6: Woods-Blackman auditorium)*

A. Panel Description

Wilderness is under threat everywhere. From prescribed burns and newly constructed roads in the Lusk Creek Wilderness in southern Illinois, to recreation pressure and land exchanges on the shores of the Cumberland Island Wilderness in Georgia. Come learn what makes Wilderness special, why these threats are greater than ever, and what groups are doing to fight back.

B. Speakers

Katie Bilodeau, Attorney, Wilderness Watch, ID

Katie has been Wilderness Watch's legislative director and policy analyst since 2024. Before joining Wilderness Watch, Katie served as Friends of the Clearwater's staff attorney for five years, fighting to keep the wild in North-central Idaho's Wild Clearwater Country. She has an M.S. in water resources and a J.D. with emphases on natural resource and environmental law as well as Native American law from the University of Idaho. She lives in Moscow, Idaho, but is fortunate to have visited the Lusk Creek Wilderness in the Shawnee National Forest earlier this year, and has plans to visit the Cumberland Island Wilderness in Georgia later this fall.

Jessica Howell-Edwards, Executive Director, Wild Cumberland, GA

Jessica has more than two decades of journalism, marketing, and activism experience – but most importantly, an intense love and respect for Georgia's natural beauty and resources. Jessica often describes her first wilderness experience on Cumberland Island more than 25 years ago as "transformative." She currently volunteers as Executive Director of Wild Cumberland, a grassroots group working to ensure Cumberland Island and its Wilderness remains protected. She is a lifelong Georgian, mom of four, DeKalb County resident, writer, and advocate.

Sam Stearns, Founder, Friends of Bell Smith Springs, IL

Sam is a native of the Shawnee Hills in Southern Illinois and for over three decades has been a strong voice for the protection of the forest there between the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. He is the founder of ***Friends of Bell Smith Springs***, an organization that promotes the preservation and conservation of the Bell Smith Springs National Natural Landmark and other public land. As a board member of Shawnee Park and Climate Alliance he seeks to create the Shawnee National Park and Climate Preserve to maintain the ecological integrity of this area. Sam is a hiker and forest watcher, who loves to share his "backyard" with folks that share his love and appreciation of the natural world.

John B. Wallace, President, Shawnee Chapter Illinois Audubon, IL

John is a retired public land manager and environmental educator. He has been a forest activist on the Shawnee National Forest for over 37 years. John is a founding member and the current president of the Shawnee Chapter Illinois Audubon, a Heartwood coordinating council member, Friends of the Cache River Watershed board member, and a founding member and vice president of Shawnee Park and Climate Alliance.

VI. Legislative Restrictions on Scientific Evidence in Rulemaking [CLE session] *(4: Gailor auditorium)*

A. Panel Description

State legislatures across Appalachia are becoming a crucial testing ground for efforts to weaken the role of science in conservation policy. What happens in Appalachia therefore matters nationally: policies that successfully sideline science in one state can provide models for replication elsewhere. This session will examine emerging legislative efforts across Appalachia that challenge science-based conservation and explore how we can respond effectively. Drawing on examples from multiple states, we will look at how these

legislative proposals develop and spread, how they can affect public health and natural resources, and what strategies have been effective in defeating anti-science legislation. The goal is to help participants anticipate emerging threats, learn from experiences across state lines, and build a stronger regional response that keeps credible science at the foundation of conservation policy.

B. Speakers

Elise Karpinski, Attorney, Harpeth Conservancy, TN

Elise serves as Director of Tennessee Water Policy, where she leads Harpeth Conservancy's policy and advocacy work across the state. In this role, she advances systemic change by collaborating with state and local officials, coalitions, community partners, and other leaders on statewide conservation campaigns and water policy initiatives. Elise is an attorney and registered lobbyist in Tennessee. Born and raised in Asheville, North Carolina, Elise is a seventh-generation Appalachian mountaineer. Coming from a family of educators and farmers, she has a deep personal commitment to protecting water, land, and the communities that depend on them.

Charles Miller, J.D., Policy Director, Alabama Rivers Alliance, AL

Charles is the Policy Director for the Alabama Rivers Alliance, a statewide network of groups working to protect and restore Alabama's water resources. Prior to returning to Alabama, he worked on water policy in the Midwest. He holds a J.D. from the University of Alabama School of Law and a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Alabama. He works to advance ARA's state-level policy priorities, including dam safety, water quantity law reform, toxics and emerging contaminants, and data center protections.

Nathaniel "Than" Hitt, Ph.D., Senior Scientist, WV Rivers Coalition, WV

Dr. Hitt is a tenth-generation West Virginian and freshwater biologist with expertise in fisheries, water quality, and open-science strategies. From 2009 to 2024, he served as a Research Biologist with the US Geological Survey in Kearneysville, WV. He currently serves as Senior Scientist for the WV Rivers Coalition.

12:45 - 2:00 pm -- Lunch

Lunch – We recommend sampling the convenient, diverse, quality dining options at Sewanee's on-campus McClurg Dining Hall, but off-campus dining options also exist on and around University Avenue.

Caucuses – Meet in the dining hall or in designated campus classrooms for self-organized discussion groups, mini-presentations, strategy sessions, or to launch new projects or coalitions. To organize and promote your caucus ahead of the conference, fill out this form by October 1st, and your caucus will be posted to our website by October 5th. See the whiteboard by Registration to organize a caucus on-site and to learn about the caucuses you can attend.

2:00 - 2:45 pm

VII. Forest Science Track Session 2. The Hidden Drivers of Forest Dynamics: How Tree Neighbors and Fungal Partners Shape Forests (*In Memoriam: Dr. Sarah McCarthy-Neumann*) *(6: Woods-Blackman auditorium)*

A. Presentation Description

The late Dr. Sarah McCarthy-Neumann spent her career studying how trees exert sustained influences on their surroundings by modifying soil conditions, microbial communities, and resource availability. These changes generate neighborhood effects that influence surrounding tree growth, survival, and recruitment, and may persist as legacy effects after mortality. This presentation will explore how tree species identity and neighborhood composition affect demographic performance, with particular attention to the roles of plant–soil feedbacks and mycorrhizal fungi in mediating these interactions. These local interactions can accumulate over time to shape forest composition and long-term forest dynamics across broader spatial scales.

B. Speaker

Rob Phillips, MS Student at TN State University, Department of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, TN

Robert was a student of the late Dr. Sarah McCarthy-Neumann (*1977-2026*), for whom he will be standing in to present on their joint research. He is a master's student at Tennessee State University. His joint research with Dr. McCarthy-Neumann examines how living and legacy tree neighborhoods influence forest demography over time and how these effects are mediated by symbioses with mycorrhizal fungi. Using nearly 50 years of data from long-term forest plots on the Cumberland Plateau, their work seeks to better understand the ecological processes driving changes in forest composition across decades. He has been involved with this research since his undergraduate studies at Sewanee: The University of the South, where he spent two summers as part of the field crew collecting data from the same long-term plots that now form the foundation of his master's research.

VIII. Coal Mining Law Today: SMCRA & ESA Litigation Update/OSMRE's Ten Day Notice Process for Citizen Complaints and Federal Oversight [CLE session]

(4: Gailor auditorium)

A. Panel Description

The first section of this panel will focus on updates regarding recent developments in the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA) litigation that Perrin presented on with Tierra Curry at SPIEL 2024. This litigation, spearheaded by de Jong, attacked the regulatory process used by the federal government and states to circumvent the protections of the Endangered Species Act in their implementation of SMCRA Title V coal mining permits. Perrin will report on the successful outcome of this litigation, as well as how the federal government has maneuvered in response to this win. We will discuss how these new legal developments shape grassroots efforts to continue challenging coal mining permits across the Southeast and Appalachia. The second section of this panel will examine how citizen complaints can trigger the U.S. Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement's (OSMRE's) Ten-Day Notice (TDN) process when state regulators fail to address coal-mining violations. Andrew will discuss TDN complaints involving South Fork Coal Company and Bluestone's Poca Contour Mine that helped lead to mine shutdowns under the prior federal administration. He will also address the new hurdles facing citizen complainants, including increased federal deference to state agencies such as the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, even when state enforcement is weak or unduly deferential to the coal industry.

B. Speakers

Perrin de Jong, Attorney, Private Practice, NC

Perrin has been practicing law since 2009 and has been a part of the public interest environmental movement of the Southeast since 1996. He has engaged in litigation and grassroots organizing at local, state, regional, and national levels to combat military toxics; protect public wildlands; stop mountaintop removal coal mining; prevent Arctic oil drilling; eliminate power plant pollution; accelerate the clean energy transition; prevent extinction of wildlife species; and seek environmental justice for exploited communities. He is one of the SPIEL conference's founders. He thanks Berea College for his B.A. and Lewis & Clark Law School for his J.D.

Andrew Young, Staff Attorney, Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance, VA

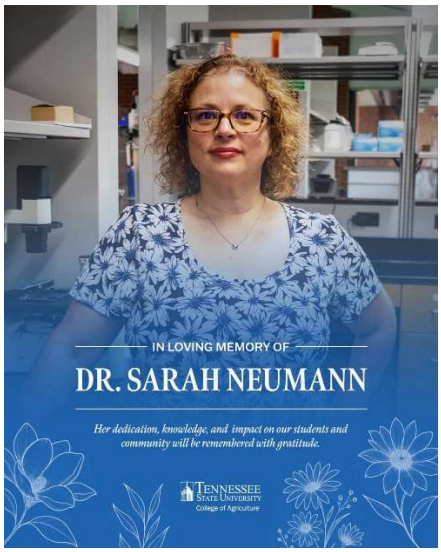
Andrew leads Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance's campaign to improve public accessibility of critical environmental information and works in close collaboration with partner

organizations to hold regulatory agencies accountable using all tools from FOIA requests to litigation. He is a former Board Member of the Cowpasture River Preservation Association, a current Board Member of the Virginia Wilderness Committee, co-founder of the Totier Creek Watershed Association, and Vice President for Federal Affairs for the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy.

3:00 - 3:30 pm

Feedback Session and Organizing Meeting for SPIEL 2027 – *(6: Spencer-Harris Commons, a.k.a. Spencer Hall atrium)* Interested in helping to organize next year's SPIEL conference? Pop in to sign up and give your feedback on what went well and what could be improved from SPIEL 2026 as we look forward to next year's event!

IN MEMORIAM



The SPIEL Conference remembers the recent loss of Dr. Sarah Neumann. She was a professor of forest ecology at Tennessee State University and a Sewanee graduate. Dr. Neumann was to speak on her research on mycorrhizal fungi's role in forest dynamics. One of her students will present in her memory.

THANK YOU FOR BEING A PART OF SPIEL 2026! SAFE TRAVELS HOME AND WE HOPE TO SEE YOU NEXT YEAR.