The Appalachian Regional Commission will award a $1,226,000 “POWER Grant” to the non-profit Friends of Blackwater in May 2022, to complete a new “Blackwater Loop Trail” connecting the Town of Thomas, the Town of Davis, Blackwater Falls State Park, and the Monongahela National Forest. The ARC grant will also support an interstate initiative to create a new “West Virginia Mountain Railroad National Historic Trail” between Elkins, WV and Cumberland, MD. Friends of Blackwater’s Executive Director Judy Rodd conveys the excitement about the ARC support for the project, “The Blackwater Canyon in West Virginia is a world-class area for heritage tourism and outdoor recreation, and this ARC grant is going to help lay the hiking, walking and biking trail system to link these outstanding regional assets together for all to enjoy.”

The ARC announced this $1.226M POWER grant on May 12. POWER grant funding is meant to help diversify the Appalachian economy and enrich communities which have struggled with the decline in coal, furthering ARC’s investment priority of building regional cultural and tourism. “Appalachia is a region with unique downtown communities, vibrant cultural and arts traditions, and beautiful natural assets,” said ARC Federal Co-Chair Gayle Manchin. “I’m excited that this POWER grant to the Friends of Blackwater will help boost regional tourism, promote outdoor recreation in Northeast West Virginia and Western Maryland, and bolster partnership between two Appalachian states.”

Blackwater Canyon, a rugged and beautiful eight-mile long gorge carved by the Blackwater River in the Allegheny Mountains, is a world-class outdoor recreation and heritage tourism area located in eastern West Virginia. The non-profit Friends of Blackwater and a robust network of partners are working to diversify this historic coal-impacted region into a scenic crown jewel of West Virginia, and to boost a tourism, travel, recreational and heritage economy which builds on the region’s rich but vanishing industrial history of coal, coke, timber, and railroad enterprises.

Of the number of key supporters of this ARC project, Senator Manchin was the lead for which Friends of Blackwater is deeply grateful. Touting the opportunity for this region Congressman David McKinley says that “ARC investment in West Virginia infrastructure can keep this region moving forward on economic development, and I am proud to support this Blackwater project.” “West Virginia’s recreation industry continues to boom as more and more visitors come and appreciate our outdoors. This trail’s strategic location between the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve and Harpers Ferry National Historic Park allows the region to improve its outdoor recreation assets and benefit from the associated economic growth,” says Shelley Moore Capito, Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Environment & Public Works, the committee which has jurisdiction over ARC.
A Coal Heritage Transforms to a Tourism Heritage

The heritage of the Blackwater Canyon is a story of massive timber, coal, coke, and railroad development, started in the 1880s by some of West Virginia’s most noted industrialists and political leaders, until the canyon was clear-cut, denuded and burnt to bare rock and soil in 1914. In 1920, the U.S. Congress established the Monongahela National Forest to protect and restore portions of the region, and in 1937 the State of West Virginia established the renowned Blackwater Falls State Park.

The region is poised to be a world-class recreational and heritage tourism destination which hosts the Blackwater Falls State Park, the Monongahela National Forest, Timberline Mountain and Canaan Valley Resorts, Dolly Sods, and other renowned destinations. West Virginia is investing heavily in outdoor recreation and heritage tourism, a $5+ billion sector that is growing and helping the state diversify and prosper economically. The Potomac Highlands region of WV alone where this project is focused, produces $317.5 million in total direct tourism spending annually and 4,100 jobs (2018 data).

Details on the ARC Power Project

1.) Completion of the Blackwater Loop Trail: Friends of Blackwater will link the Town of Davis, the Town of Thomas, Blackwater Falls State Park, the Monongahela National Forest, key hubs of tourism and employment, historic assets, and other important areas on a 8-mile “Blackwater Loop Trail” that connects and improves existing trails, builds new segments, and provides new pedestrian/bicycle crossings of the Blackwater River and its tributaries. The Blackwater Loop is a partnership among the Towns of Davis and Thomas, Tucker County, the WV State Park system including Blackwater Falls State Park, the WV DEP, the WV Department of Transportation, the U.S. Forest Service, and others.

2.) Connect Blackwater to the Broader Potomac Highlands Region: Friends of Blackwater is underway with a regional plan to connect the Blackwater Loop Trail to the broader region, from the City of Elkins, through Thomas and Davis, up to Cumberland MD with 20 other heritage locations including towns, villages, employment centers, tourism hubs, and recreational areas in WV’s Mineral, Grant, Tucker, and Randolph Counties. This would be done through creation of the “West Virginia Mountain Railroad National Historic Trail” located along the Blackwater River, the North Branch of the Potomac River, and along the historic WV Central & Pittsburgh Railroad corridor built by WV Senator Henry Gassaway Davis with the support of other U.S. Senators between 1880-1889 – known as “The Senators Railroad”.

All along this rail corridor are the remains of the early industrialization era in the mountains – some crumbling, some standing strong. From coal mines and sawmills, to coke oven complexes, pulp mills, leather making facilities; from company stores and headquarters to company houses, railroad bridges, tunnels, depots, repair shops, power plants, and banks. Tens of thousands of people lived and were employed along this railroad corridor. 14 languages were spoken in the town of Thomas in its heyday. The Trail will honor immigrant and black families who worked in the mines and mills of Mineral, Grant, Tucker and Randolph Counties.
Today this corridor is a place of great beauty, as nature has healed the scarred industrial landscape and opened up new opportunities for outdoor recreation and heritage tourism as an important industry, taking the place of mines and mills. Other public lands that could support the Trail route are Maryland’s Potomac State Forest and Wolf Den State Park, Jennings Randolph Lake, with campgrounds and boating access in West Virginia (USACE), and West Virginia’s Barnum Campground and Allegheny Wildlife Management Area, the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) Trail, the C&O Canal, and the Passages of the Western Potomac Heritage Area of Maryland.

Conceptual sketch of the proposed pedestrian/bicycle cable suspension bridge on Blackwater Loop Trail.

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