



## COVID-19 Grantee Spotlight: Friends of Blackwater



*\*Image courtesy of Eberly College at WVU*

Our mission at **Friends of Blackwater** is to build support for sustainable economic development and environmental protection in West Virginia and the Allegheny Highlands through "people power" strategies. By engaging and mobilizing the public and building a network of concerned citizens, we contribute to environmental and community health—both vital in the current climate of COVID-19.

**"In adapting to the COVID pandemic, we are learning as we go. We see plenty of hope, idealism and courage, as well as fears and worries. We want Friends of Blackwater to be a place where people can put their hope and positive energy."**

Judith Rodd

Director, Friends of Blackwater

Responding to the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, **we have ramped up our online outreach, engagement, and advocacy.** These strategies can be effective—for example, we mobilized thousands of public comments online to defeat plans for commercial timbering in West Virginia State Parks. We are now planning a national webinar on community forest protection issues with top-ranked scientists, instead of the in-person conference that we had planned.

Fortunately, we have a recently-updated website and blog, along with Facebook and Twitter feeds reaching several thousand established online supporters. We use Action Network for membership, e-mail, donations, and events. **Our staff (working from home) provides entertaining online content about our programs and interests several times a day, and much of this content is widely shared by our friends and supporters.** Our "brand" of community-driven land protection and outdoor recreation, social justice and

heritage education, and wildlife/nature preservation and advocacy—plays well on social media.

The COVID-19 crisis is definitely affecting our campaigns and initiatives. For example, two months ago we organized a public meeting to challenge a permit for a drilling waste injection well, next to a valuable recreational river. The community turnout at the meeting, with lots of local farmers and householders, was great! This kind of face-to-face community program is a vital part of our grassroots, community-based advocacy.

But now, three months later, we are organizing public comments on another pollution permit—and because of COVID-19, the permitting agency says “no public meeting.” With citizen pressure, we got a Zoom Hearing! Can we show the kind of community solidarity that we need to win—in a “Zoom Hearing?” We’ll find out!

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The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare societal inequities that Southern Partners Fund has fought since it’s incorporation. SPF’s capacity for enabling its grantee partners to build coordinated rapid response teams in their communities is well documented. SPF’s grantee organizations rely on Justice Fund for Disaster Relief and Renewal grants to identify their most vulnerable populations and connect them to agencies and services that can help. In turn, vulnerable populations in these communities trust SPF grantee organizations to provide them with the best support available. In many communities, our grantee partners are their first responders.

COVID-19 is currently the primary focus for the Justice Fund for Disaster Relief and Renewal while SPF aggressively seeks new funding partners. To date, SPF has raised over **\$4M out of a \$10M funding goal** and is already issuing its first round of grants to partner organizations throughout the rural Southeast.

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**For more information on Friends of Blackwater, or on contributing to SPF’s Justice Fund for Disaster Relief and Renewal**, please click below to visit our dedicated COVID-19 page or contact us by phone with the contact details provided below.

[More Info](#)

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