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AMPHIBIAN STUDY

HERPING IN HIGH PLACES



UVa-Wise team hunts for amphibians in SW Va.'s high-altitude wetlands

BY SARAH WADE
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

NORTON, Va. — There's a wetland at the top of a mountain in Wise County. That's not a typo: Along a ridge of Stone Mountain, 3,000 feet above sea level, sits a boggy pond surrounded by a flat stretch of mud and low grasses, looking for all the world like a little swamp photoshopped over the forest.

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Several wetlands areas are being studied by Wally Smith, associate professor of biology at the University of Virginia's College at Wise, and his students. **ABOVE:** A mud salamander was found in the wetlands on Stone Mountain in Wise County.

ONLINE
Watch video with this article at [HeraldCourier.com](https://www.HeraldCourier.com).

PHOTOS BY DAVID CRIGGER/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Storm looming, officials prepare demolition of condo

BY TERRY SPENCER
and BOBBY CAINA CALVAN
Associated Press

SURFSIDE, Fla. — Rescuers suspended their search for the living and the dead in the rubble of a collapsed South Florida condo building Saturday to allow crews to start preparing the unstable remainder of the structure for demolition ahead of a tropical storm.

The search and rescue mission was halted in the afternoon as workers began the precarious business of boring holes to hold explosives in the concrete of the

INSIDE

» As condo crashed down, some barely escaped. **A3**

still-standing portion of the Champlain Towers South tower in Surfside, Miami-Dade Assistant Fire Chief Raide Jadallah told relatives awaiting word on missing loved ones.

In the closed-door briefing, Jadallah said the suspension was a necessary safety measure because the drilling could cause the structure to fail. If that were to happen, he said, "It's just going to collapse without warning."

But in video that one of the relatives livestreamed on social media, one of them was heard calling it "devastating" that the search was on pause. She asked whether rescuers could at least work the perimeter of the site so as not "to stop the operation for so many painful hours."

Also Saturday, the confirmed death toll from the partial collapse of the 12-story building rose to 24 with the discovery of two more bodies. There were 121 people still unaccounted for.

Concerns had been mounting over the past week that the damaged structure was at risk of failure, endangering the crews below. The search in adjacent areas of

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Britain to play in U.S. Senior Open » C1

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

LOCATION	NUMBER OF CASES
Worldwide	183,391,800+
United States	3,965,280+
Virginia	680,984
Tennessee	867,497

LOCATION	NUMBER OF DEATHS
Worldwide	33,713,600+
United States	665,000+
Virginia	11,423
Tennessee	12,571

PERCENTAGE FULLY VACCINATED IN VIRGINIA: **51.1%**
 PERCENTAGE FULLY VACCINATED IN TENNESSEE: **37.5%**

SOURCES: Johns Hopkins, Virginia and Tennessee Departments of Health, AP

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The Fourth of July is a day we celebrate our nation's birthday. To give our carriers and staff members the opportunity to spend time with their families, we will not publish a print edition of the Herald Courier on Monday, July 5. A replica digital e-edition will publish online Monday at [heraldcourier.com](https://www.HeraldCourier.com). The e-edition will include all regular features, including updated obituaries. Subscribers may log in to access the e-edition. Please note: The comics and TV listings pages that would run Monday can be found on pages C8 and C9 in today's edition. Activate your online account today at [heraldcourier.com/activate](https://www.HeraldCourier.com/activate).

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Herping

From Page A1

Walter "Wally" Smith stood at the edge of the wetland's small, tea-colored pool. It was Friday, June 25, and Smith — an assistant professor of biology at the University of Virginia's College at Wise — was just beginning to explain why it's hard to find frogs during the day when he was interrupted by a frog.

The creature hopping over the mud at his feet was tiny, well-camouflaged and quick enough that most people would probably have missed it. But Smith, 36, is a herpetologist, a zoologist who specializes in amphibians and reptiles. In seconds, he'd scooped it up and lightly pinned its fingernail-length back legs between his fingers.

"That is a little, recently transformed wood frog," Smith said as he pulled a camera from his backpack with his free hand. "It probably just left the pond in the last couple weeks."

The biologist added "wood frog" to the amphibian count he's keeping as he and Belle Romans — a 20-year-old rising senior at UVA-Wise who is working with him through a summer fellowship — combed the wetland's edge.

The site is one of six high-altitude wetlands across about 30 miles of Southwest Virginia that Smith and Romans are routinely visiting this summer and early fall, all to answer a simple question: What frogs and salamanders live there?

As far as Smith can tell, nobody else has asked it, and the initial results have already upended scientific knowledge about a particular salamander species. Smith said he hopes that's just the start.

"I think it'll help rewrite our understanding of these wetlands," Smith said. "We're finding really unique species."

More than a mud pit

A wetland, as the name implies, is an area of land that's either regularly covered by or saturated with water. The best-known types are found along coasts, river floodplains and other low-lying areas.

But the wetlands dotting the upper slopes of the Appalachians don't even have a firm definition, Smith said. For the amphibian survey, he and Romans have decided to define them as any wetlands higher than about 2,700 feet.

The wetlands' origins are hazy, but Smith said that some of the study's sites seem to have formed in little depressions on mountain ridges — places without any nearby streams for rainfall and snowmelt to escape into.

Several of the other sites sit atop something he called a "hanging valley" — a flat, treeless expanse containing a wetland, often at the headwaters of a stream. Glacier movements carved hanging valleys in other mountain ranges, Smith said. Not the ones in the Appalachians.

"This is just more the way the landscape is formed," he said. "It's so neat, because it's not created by humans in any way, but you'll be walking through the forest and all of a sudden break out [into] bright sunlight — this big wetland where it's just too wet to have that forest canopy growth," Smith said.

The wetlands aren't connected to streams, which means no fish to gobble up frog and salamander eggs, Smith said. If you're an amphibian looking for good real



Wally Smith from UVA-Wise photographs an eastern Newt at a wetlands area on Stone Mountain in Wise County.

Frog Log

Amphibian tally from June 25 visit to the Stone Mountain wetland:

- » 20 mountain dusky salamanders
- » Five wood frog metamorphs (young individuals that just transformed from tadpoles)
- » Two eastern newts
- » One northern dusky salamander
- » One mud salamander
- » Total amphibians: 29



A red eft stage of the eastern newt was found at a wetlands area on Stone Mountain.

estate in these mountains, you can't do much better than a fishing wetland.

While Appalachia's high-altitude wetlands are extremely rare, Smith said most people either don't know that they exist or don't realize what they are.

"We're losing a lot of these [high-altitude] wetlands, because so many people see them and they think, 'Oh, it's just a big mud pit,'" Smith said.

The spots can easily wind up drained or otherwise destroyed in the process of land development and timber harvesting, or just disturbed by human activity, Smith said.

"... We've got, in the area, a very big motorized trail boom that's happening right now," said Smith, who is also a member of the Clinch Coalition, a community group that advocates for environmental protections in Southwest Virginia. "That's obviously a fun place to come if you've got, you know, an ATV or a truck or a jeep, but unfortunately then, that churns up a lot of the herp."

"Herp": herpetology slang for amphibians and reptiles. "Herping," Smith explained, is simply the act of looking for those animals, and a "herper," is one who herps. He said the terms can apply to anyone and everyone, from a 6-year-old poking around in a backyard to a pair of researchers herping in high-altitude wetlands where no herpers have herped before.

Smith said that recording what frogs and "manders," as he sometimes calls salamanders, live in these unique wetlands is as necessary a research question as it is basic. It's hard to know how to protect an ecosystem, or notice how it might be changing, if you don't know what's in it to begin with, he said.

He's confident that all of that data will culminate in a peer-reviewed scientific article: an impressive notch in Romans' belt, he said, since it's rare for undergraduates to publish research.

"Beyond [that], we're basically going to hand all of our data off to the [U.S.] Forest Service ... because these wetlands are on Forest Service land," Smith said. "So they'll know what species are here, what habitat features those species need. ... If they're going to log around this [spot] or do a prescribed burn or something in the future, [the data] can help them better inform their management."

Herpspeak

Herpetologists are zoologists who focus on reptiles and amphibians, and like any group of people obsessed with something, they have their own lingo. Here are the most common terms Smith said he and other amphibian experts — along with amateur enthusiasts — use to describe their field.

- » **Herp (noun):** A catch-all term for amphibian and reptile species. Derived from "herpe-tofauna," the formal scientific term for reptiles and amphibians. Pl. herps.
- » **Herp (verb):** To go looking for amphibians. Herped, herping, herps. Anyone can herp, Smith said, from kids in their backyards to tenured researchers like himself.
- » **Herper (noun):** One who herps.
- » **Frog logger:** A digital recorder used to record frog calls.
- » **Mander:** Short for salamander. This one's actually specific to Smith. "That's kind of my personal, just growing-up-in-the-South slang term," said Smith, who hails from northeast Georgia. "It's kind of a term of endearment. I guess, that I use when I find one."

"If all of this makes you think of herpes, you aren't the first to do so. I had a guy a few years ago who called me up at the college, and he wondered if I could come give a presentation on my herpes to his group," Smith said, laughing. "I was like, I'm sorry? ... Oh, yeah, he's talking about 'herps.'"



Wally Smith holds two mountain dusky salamanders that were found.

nothing but mountain dusksies — five, then seven, nine, into double digits.

"It's crazy that we're seeing that many here," Smith said. "... We're probably seeing just a fraction of what's actually here."

Their abundance was a good sign for the general area, Smith said that amphibians form a key link in the mountain's food chain, snapping up energy and nutrients from invertebrates and transferring it to the birds, fish and reptiles that then eat them. If you put all of the salamanders and other amphibians here on



Wally Smith from UVA-Wise holds a young wood frog during a survey of a wetlands area on Stone Mountain in Wise County.



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Study

From Page A4

a giant scale, they would actually outweigh everything bigger than them, he said.

"They really dominate the vertebrate biomass, the stuff with a backbone, that we have around here," he said. "Amphibians — it sounds so depressing to say this — they're really important, ecologically, because they get eaten a lot."

The only piece of equipment Smith brought beyond his field camera was a "frog logger," a small digital recorder connected to a mic crouched in a cone-shaped plastic amplifier. Smith — by now on the far side of the wetland — strung the mic around the trunk of a mountain laurel, put the recorder in a Tupperware container beneath it and planted a little orange flag to mark the spot.

"[The recorder is] a really good way to inventory the frogs, because even ... if we were to come out here at night and walk down to the pond, most of the frogs would quit calling when the word got out that we were here," Smith said. "Belle's going to have probably about 54 hours, after this, of frog calls to listen to."

Besides patience, the research requires stamina. Smith said that most of



Belle Romans, a UVA-Wise senior, looks for amphibians in a wetlands on Stone Mountain in Wise County. DAVID BRIGGS/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

"We're not seeing the exact same species list at each of our six wetlands. While it's still early in the study, that indicates to us that the high-elevation wetlands across our region are likely ... not all the same in terms of species composition. ... That's important from a conservation perspective, since it means that we can't just assume that if we lose one of these wetlands to disturbance or pollution ... the others will take their place."

—Walter Smith, UVA-Wise associate professor of biology, on survey's initial findings

the high-altitude wetlands he and Romans are surveying require a 2- to 2.5-mile hike and 500 feet of elevation gain, one way. Romans — who sought out the research fellowship

after taking two courses with Smith — said she loves it.

"Belle has been a beast," Smith said of her. "We've hiked more than 30 miles in the past month."

'Kind of like nerd Christmas'

Smith finished sweeping the Stone Mountain wetland alone that morning, though. Romans had to duck out early for her other summer gig, at a women's clothing boutique in Norton. As the biologist neared the end of his circle around the pond, his now-written tally included a heap of mountain dusksies, several more wood frogs and a northern dusky salamander.

"Hah hah!" he said, scooping up one of the mud salamanders he'd been trying not to hope for.

This one was more orange than red, and a dull

orange at that. But for the amphibian survey, that was even better: Smith said the drab color, plus the salamander's small size, meant this one was young — maybe 2 or 3 years old.

anyone—there's actually reproduction happening here, which is really good for the population."

Smith snapped a few photos of the animal, set it back down and turned his attention to the next log. "It's honestly like being a kid," he said of the work. "You just never know what you're going to find. It's kind of like nerd Christmas, in a way."

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In this satellite image provided by Maxar Technologies heavy-lift cranes are used to aid in the search and recovery operation at the partially collapsed Champlain Towers South condo building on Saturday in Surfside, Florida.

Condo

From Page A1

the collapse site was curtailed, and shifts detected by monitors early Thursday prompted a 15-hour suspension of the entire effort until engineers determined it was safe to resume.

The building won't come down until Monday at the earliest, according to Jadallah. That estimate was based on how many holes the demolition team needs to drill, he said, adding that the process has to move slowly to prevent a premature collapse.

With Tropical Storm Elsa looming in the Caribbean and forecast to move toward the state in the coming days, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said demolishing the "tottering" and "structurally unsound" structure is the prudent thing to do.

"If the building is taken down, this will protect our search and rescue teams, because we don't know when it could fall over," DeSantis said at a news conference earlier in the day. "And, of course, with these gusts, potentially that would create a really severe hazard."

"The fear was that [Elsa] may take the building down for us and take it down in the wrong direction," Surfside Mayor Charles Burkett said.

Elsa was downgraded Saturday from a Category 1 hurricane to a tropical storm with maximum sustained winds of 70 mph as it brushed past the island of Hispaniola, home to the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

The long-term forecast track showed it heading toward Florida as a tropical storm by Tuesday morning, though some models would carry it into the Gulf or up the Atlantic Coast. Meteorologists warned that it could bring heavy rain and gusty winds to the Miami area.

"So we can't let our guard down," said Robert Molleda of the National Weather Service. "You still need to be watching this very closely."

Once the structure is demolished, the remnants will be removed immediately with the intent of giving rescuers access for the first time to parts of the garage area that are a focus of interest, Jadallah said. That could give a clearer picture of voids that may exist in the rubble and could possibly harbor survivors.

No one has been rescued alive since the first hours after the June 24 collapse.

Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said officials would resume the search and rescue on any sections of the pile that are "safe to access as soon as we are cleared."

Some families had asked to be able to return to the building to retrieve personal belongings, but they will not be allowed to do so.

"At the end of the day, that building is too unsafe to let people go back in," DeSantis said. "I know there's a lot of people who were able to get out, fortunately, who have things there. We're very sensitive to that, but I don't think there's any way you can let somebody go up in that building given the shape that it's in now."

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Virginia High football coach Crist leaving for Radford

SPORTS » B1



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Pipeline restarts operations

BY CATHY BUSSEWITZ, BEN FINLEY AND TOM FOREMAN JR. Associated Press

CLEMMONS, N.C. — The nation's largest fuel pipeline restarted operations Wednesday, days after it was forced to shut down by a gang of hackers. The disruption of Colonial Pipeline

caused long lines at gas stations in the Southeast due to distribution problems and panic-buying, draining supplies at thousands of gas stations. Colonial initiated the restart of pipeline operations late Wednesday, saying in a statement that "all lines, including those lateral lines that have been run-

ning manually, will return to normal operations." But it will take several days for deliveries to return to normal, the company said. In the meantime, drivers have been finding gas stations with little or no gas in some Southeast states.

The Colonial Pipeline, which delivers about 45% of the fuel consumed on the East Coast, was hit on Friday with a cyberattack by hackers who lock up computer systems and demand a ransom to release them. The hackers

INSIDE

» Local gas stations struggle to keep gas at pumps. **A3**

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BOONE LAKE FISH SURVEY

Fish boom

TVA officials expecting rise in Boone Lake's fish population as lake levels rise back to normal

BY SARAH WADE BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

KINGSFORT, Tenn. — Jon Michael Mollish stood at the bow of a low fishing boat Wednesday afternoon, scanning the waters of a cove in Boone Lake. He dipped a scoop net into the water, pulled it up and dropped the fish writhing inside into a tub of water on the boat. In less than a minute, the process repeated itself.

To the untrained eye, it might have looked like Mollish was either extremely lucky or some kind of hand-fishing guru. But Mollish is a fisheries biologist for the Tennessee Valley Authority. With the three others onboard, he was electrofishing — using a mild electric



TVA Fisheries Biologist Jon Michael Mollish shows three different type of bass that were sampled during the fish survey at Boone Lake on Wednesday. LEFT BELOW: Mollish shows the teeth on a longnose gar at the lake. RIGHT BELOW: Mollish shows a channel catfish during the survey.



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Hospitals want papers public in case against opioid maker

BY JONATHAN MATTISE Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — More than 20 hospitals want a slew of documents from a drug manufacturer made public after a Tennessee judge ruled against the company without a trial in a lawsuit over the opioid epidemic, saying the company intentionally withheld records and lied at least a dozen times.

The hospitals, which are in Tennessee and Virginia, filed a motion last week to intervene and make documents from Endo Pharmaceuticals available to them and the public from legal discovery in the case in Sullivan County Circuit Court.

The hospitals in 2019 filed their own lawsuit pending against Endo and other pharmaceutical companies in Tennessee in Greene County, and it's been transferred to federal court.

The hospitals are now asking a judge to order the release of the documents in the Sullivan County case. The plaintiffs in that case include northeastern Tennessee district attorneys and a baby born with neonatal abstinence syndrome due to exposure to opioids during the mother's

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COVID-19 PANDEMIC

LOCATION	#CASES	#DEATHS
Worldwide	159,510,400+	3,322,200+
United States	32,807,800+	583,500+
Virginia	66,347	18,254
Tennessee	855,587	12,256

% FULLY VACCINATED IN VA: 35.9%
% FULLY VACCINATED IN TENN.: 39.0%

SOURCES: Johns Hopkins, Virginia and Tennessee Departments of Health, AP

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Appalachian Power seeks feedback on Washington County transmission line

BY ROBERT SORRELL BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Appalachian Power is asking for feedback regarding construction of a 6.5-mile electric transmission line that will cross south of Abingdon, Virginia.

The Washington County Improvements Project involves building transmission line and upgrading three substations in the area, according to a news release.

MORE INFORMATION

» For more information, visit www.AppalachianPower.com/WashingtonCounty.

The project allows for future retirement or replacement of aging transmission lines, increasing electric reliability and improving station reliability by upgrading deteriorating

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Careers in Bloom at ACT!

Opioid

From Page A1

pregnancy. The hospitals contend they want to avoid running into the same problems the judge cited against Endo.

"Accordingly, the hospitals, and the public as a whole, have a social and economic interest in gaining expeditious and ready access to the Endo documents and materials produced in this case through the efforts of the Court and the plaintiffs without having to face the burdens, roadblocks and misrepresentations encountered all over again in what has become a nationwide litigation strategy by Endo."

Last month, Chancellor E.G. Moody entered the default judgment against Endo, a rare move to rule against the opioid firm before a civil trial over its role in the epidemic. Moody wrote that there was a "coordinated strategy" by the company and its attorneys to delay proceedings, deprive plaintiffs of information and interfere with the administration of justice.

The judge said the company produced almost 400,000 more documents after the discovery period closed, despite saying in February 2020 that it had not withheld anything. Many of the records that the company knowingly withheld were highly relevant and in some cases directly contradict testimony by Endo's witnesses, the judge wrote.

The company has said that it plans to appeal the judge's orders in the Sullivan County case, calling them "procedurally, factually, and legally deficient." Endo did not respond to a request for comment on the hospitals' motion to release the documents publicly.

The judge has set a July 26 start to a trial over how much in damages to award in the case.

Attorney Gary Brewer, who is representing the hospitals, said there's an "overpowering reason" to unseal Endo's documents.

"They just don't want the public to know what they've done," Brewer said in a phone interview. "And they've made a fortune out of selling these pills."



DAVID CRIGGER/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

TVA biologists electrofish to sample the quality of the fish around Boone Lake on Wednesday.

Fish

From Page A1

current to briefly stun fish for capture — to conduct an annual survey of the lake's fish.

The results of the current survey won't be ready for a while, possibly not until next winter, according to John Justice, another TVA fisheries biologist.

Meanwhile, Justice said, in the roughly six years that Boone Lake's water levels have been lowered for the Boone Dam repair project, the lake's fish populations have done surprisingly well. And as the lake levels keep rising, he's expecting the numbers to go up.

"We're anticipating a boom," Justice said. "The fish population usually explodes for a few years [when a lake level rises like this]."

Mollish said that electrofishing is simple: A generator aboard the boat provides the electrical current, which is released into the water through pipes and controlled by a foot pedal and several other safety mechanisms.

He and the other fisheries biologists said the electrical current doesn't hurt fish and only stuns them for a few seconds — but they added that you definitely don't want to fall off the boat when it's live.

From the tank on the boat, Mollish lifted a trio of the black bass that anglers vie for, along with a longnose gar, some bluegills and a gaping catfish. He said the team examines and logs details about every fish, including its weight and length, how well it seems to be eating and whether it has any parasites, lesions or other abnormalities.

"When fish are stressed, they're more likely to get parasites," he said. "We haven't seen anything out of the ordinary so far [during this survey] — that's a great thing. Everything's looked pretty normal."

Justice said that such surveys, which also

include information about insects and creatures living in the lakebed, give him and his colleagues a good sense of the lake's overall status as well as the health of its fish.

"It's kind of a physical for the reservoir," he said. "[Fish are] the canary in the coal mine."

As he steered a boat carrying members of the media, Justice — sporting a neck gaiter decorated with freshwater fish species — said TVA has been surveying Boone Lake's fish populations since about 1990. Thanks to consistency in the times and locations of the surveys, TVA can use that data to assess long-term trends in fish populations, he said.

The surveys normally happen every two to three years, but since the repair project started, TVA and the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency have been doing them twice a year, Justice said.

The Boone Dam repair project isn't set to finish until the summer of 2022. But Sam Vinson, the principal project manager, said the lake's water levels are on schedule to reach their old summer pool level of about 1,380 feet by this July. The water level, which TVA slowly began increasing last fall, is currently being held for the month of May to allow for some testing, he said. It will be allowed to start rising again at the end of the month.

Meanwhile, Justice and the other fisheries biologists said they're on the lookout for a spike in fish numbers as the lake level creeps higher, partly because of all the new vegetation along the banks. It makes good habitat for fish, he said.

Shannon O'Quinn, another TVA fisheries biologist, said that while the corporation has cleared some patches of trees and other large plants that will end up underwater again, they've also worked with the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency to plant low-lying shrubs and install concrete structures for fish habitat.

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Power

From Page A1

equipment, according to Appalachian Power.

Utility representatives previously announced the project and hosted a public open house in September 2015 before placing the project on hold. After resuming the project last year, the project team further reviewed landowner feedback and conducted additional route reviews to determine a proposed power line route. The team now seeks feedback on the proposed route, the release states.

The proposed route begins at the South Abingdon Substation near Vances Mill Road. The upgrades then travel southeast, crossing Green Spring Road and the Virginia Creeper Trail. The route continues east across Job Stuart Highway and travels south to the Arrowhead Substation near Rivemont Drive and the South Fork Holston River.

Company representatives are inviting area landowners to a virtual open house at AppalachianPower.com/WashingtonCounty to learn more about the project and provide feedback to the project team by Friday, June 11.

Landowners should expect to receive a packet in the mail that includes additional project details and a comment card they can return by mail with their feedback, the release states.

If approved, construction would begin in the fall of 2023 and conclude in fall 2024.

The project is in addition to the South Abingdon Extension, which received approval in 2017. It consisted of lines that crossed Interstate 81 and passed near the Virginia Highlands Airport, connecting an existing line between Saltville and Kingsport and the substation at Vances Mill.

George Porter, an Appalachian Power spokesman, said the South Abingdon Extension was completed in 2019. It was in service in late 2019, according to an Appalachian Power timeline.

Appalachian Power began studying the Abingdon and Washington County grid after the region was affected by severe winter weather in 2013. The company expected about \$50 million in projects near Abingdon.



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Happy Easter

BY THE NUMBERS A4



Our tortured tax history

'Good Government in 2021' series A3



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Vaccine passports are latest flash point in COVID politics

BY MARK SCOLFORD
Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. — Vaccine passports being developed to verify COVID-19 immunization status and allow inoculated people to more freely travel, shop and dine have become the latest flash point in America's perpetual political wars, with Republicans portraying them as a heavy-handed intrusion into personal freedom and private health choices.

See **VACCINE**, Page A2



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COVID-19

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LOCATION	#CASES	#DEATHS
Worldwide	130,643,500+	2,844,899+
United States	30,668,200+	554,700+
Virginia	623,381	10,287
Tennessee	813,614	11,915

#VACCINATED IN VIRGINIA: 2,784,038
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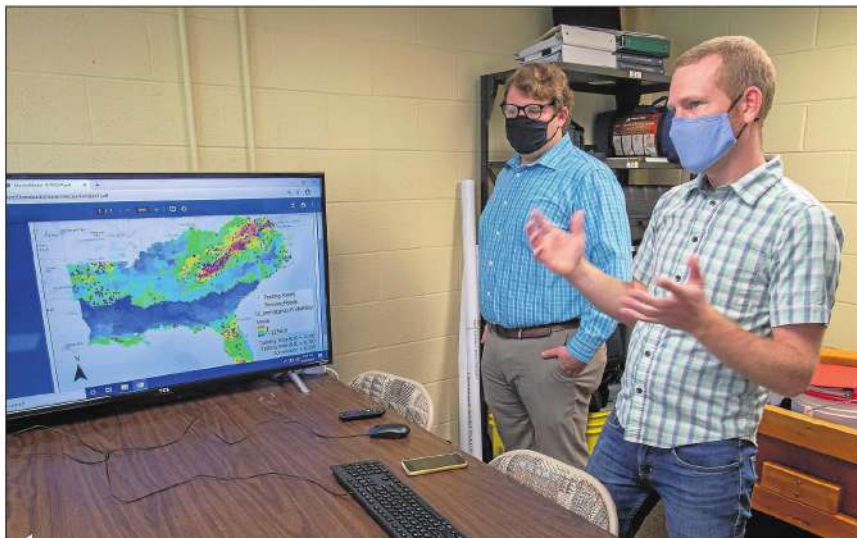
SOURCES: Johns Hopkins, Virginia and Tennessee Departments of Health, AP

Thank you, **Tim D. Jesse**, for subscribing to the Bristol Herald Courier.

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Weather » A12



TENNESSEE CLIMATE OFFICE



Andrew Joyner (right), associate professor at ETSU, and William Tollefson, lecturer at ETSU, talk about the climate research that they are working on.

Tracking trends

Through ETSU team, Tennessee gains an official climate office

BY SARAH WADE
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

JOHNSON CITY, Tenn. — In late March, Andrew Joyner opened his email to find a question from a forecaster for the U.S. National Weather Service's Nashville office.

Joyner, an associate professor in East Tennessee State University's geosciences department, said that Tennessee had just experienced a wave of cold air in February, the same one that left millions of Texans without power.

"Even West Tennessee had a pretty high impact from that event," Joyner said March 26, sitting in a cramped GIS lab room in Ross Hall. "It was below freezing in Memphis for ... nine days."

Temperatures for the previous few Februaries had veered in the opposite direction, Joyner said, into warm stretches that prompted plants to start growing early. That can put the plants — including huge quantities of crops on Tennessee farms — at risk of dying if the temperature drops below freezing again.

"So ... the [NWS] Nashville office reached out," Joyner said. "They have this interesting question: When should they start putting out freeze advisories?"

Joyner said it was exactly the



William Tollefson, lecturer at East Tennessee State University, takes a wind reading while atop of Roan Mountain.

kind of question that justifies the climate program that he and William Tollefson, a lecturer in the same department, have been running out of ETSU.

In January, the American Association of State Climatologists (AASC) recognized the Tennessee Climate Office, as it's called, as the state's official climate office. Previously, only the Volunteer State and

Massachusetts lacked such offices, which track, analyze and distribute a wide range of state-specific climate data.

Joyner and Tollefson — now Tennessee's state climatologist and assistant state climatologist, respectively — said they hope the official recognition will help them expand the scope and funding for their work. But they've already been doing that work for years.

Weather, with a lot of context

What does a climatologist actually do?

The way Joyner puts it, the work entails putting any kind of short-term weather event — that February freeze spell, for example — into a longer-term context to help people understand its significance.

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We welcome and are scheduling appointments for:

Climate

From Page A1

"You're really looking at comparing conditions, what averages are, what your departures from averages [are]," said Joyner, a slight, animated guy who grew up helping his family bale hay on their North Carolina farm.

"What happened last month, and how is it different than we would expect normal ... to be?" he said, as an example. "And even the definition of what is normal, that's a climate question — that's highly debated."

Within state climate offices, climatologists' research can depend somewhat on their interests, said Tollefson, sitting beside Joyner in the lab. Many gravitate toward agriculture, but Joyner's specialty is hazard planning and mitigation — think hurricanes, floods and other natural disasters — and he said he wants that to be a focus area for the TCO.

What the TCO has in common with others across the country is its work to collect, organize and share high-quality weather data from across their state.

Every week, for example, Tollefson submits drought-related data for Tennessee to the U.S. Drought Monitor, a national system for tracking and monitoring droughts throughout the country.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture uses the Drought Monitor to decide when to declare disasters and determine farmers' eligibility for low-interest loans — so Joyner said it's important for that drought data to

be as accurate and local as possible.

But when Joyner joined ETSU in 2013, nobody in Tennessee was contributing to the Drought Monitor. He said that a climate center at Louisiana State University was submitting data for Tennessee, but that's a far cry from local, and Tollefson said the climatologist doing that work didn't have much time to properly comb through the data.

"They miss things," Joyner said. "Some things ... appear small, but to a county that's having some impacts on their crops and [needs] to get insurance from USDA or something, and they're not in the correct drought category, that's a pretty big deal to them."

As far as Joyner could tell, Tennessee didn't

“We want to do these academies, where we go through some of the data sets that we use ... and basically train them to better understand how to assess their environment and understand their risk and understand how they can become more resilient.”

— Andrew Joyner, state climatologist for the Tennessee Climate Office and associate professor in ETSU's geosciences department

have a state climate office at all.

That might sound like an odd agency to anyone unfamiliar with it. But Tennessee used to have one, back when the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration provided one for every state through its State Climatologist program.

"These are people who interpret the climate for the media, citizens of the state that they repre-

sent, and also the state officials," Adnan Akyuz, North Dakota's state climatologist and former president of AASC, the group that just recognized the TCO, said of what state climatologists do.

Take droughts, he said. Using historical weather context, state climatologists can help leaders in their states understand how bad a drought is and how to respond to it.

Akyuz said he's doing that for his own state at the moment.

"I am meeting with the state officials every week to discuss what the state can do during the next growing season that can mitigate the impact of the upcoming drought in the next growing season," he said. "So this could bring a lot of economic impact that might not be visible."

Akyuz said that state climatologists also serve as important record-keepers, gathering all sorts of weather data for the state and keeping it in one place. And they can use that information to conduct valuable research, he said — how climate change has impacted agriculture and other important economic sectors, for example.

The AASC formed in

1976, he said, several years after the NOAA disbanded its State Climatologist department, and various states began starting their own climate offices out of universities or other government offices.

Most states now have climate offices recognized by AASC. But Tennessee's history is spotty at best on that front, Joyner said. The Tennessee Valley Authority appeared to have a state climatologist during the 1990s and early 2000s.

"But to our knowledge, they weren't providing anything," Joyner said.

"Yeah, it was mainly an internal [position], like, just TVA stuff," Tollefson said. "And it was one of many hats that they wore

See **OFFICE**, Page A8

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Office

From Page A6

— it wasn't a full-time job."

The position seems to have vanished sometime around 2005 or 2006, Joyner said.

He said he started working at ETSU with the goal of starting the Tennessee Climate Office there. But it wasn't until after he hired Tollefson, in 2014, that the process really got going.

Humble origins and high hopes

Tollefson is tall, stocky and significantly less talkative than Joyner, but like the latter, he's easygoing and quick to laugh. The two met at LSU, when Joyner was working on his doctorate and Tollefson was earning his master's degree in geography and climatology.

"I convinced him to come here for, like, pennies to be an adjunct, and then it eventually turned into something more," Joyner said.

The two started an unofficial state climate office for Tennessee in 2016, with the blessings of both ETSU and AASC.

Neither blessing included funding, so their "office" became part of the tiny former dorm room that houses another lab they manage — the Geoinformatics and Disaster Science (GADS) Lab — and their own offices in Ross Hall. The climatology work had to fit between their other teaching and research responsibilities.

"They were starting from scratch. It wasn't like the old state climatologist retired a year ago and they were dusting off the office," said Glenn Kerr, AASC's executive director. "When there was interest in establishing the Tennessee Climate Office, we worked with Andrew and Wil [William's nickname] on a kind of 'if you build it and demonstrate the value for it, then we can gain recognition' [basis]."

Some state climate offices have their own "mesonets," networks of high-quality weather stations that can capture vast quantities of meteorological data. But that kind of technology costs millions of dollars, Joyner said.

Instead, for the past few years, he and Tollefson have been building a storehouse of Tennessee-specific climate data using outside sources — weather stations at airports, radar-based precipitation data from the National Weather Service, even measurements taken by Tennessee residents in their own backyards through a community program run by the NOAA.

Beyond sharing that data with the Drought Monitor, the team has also been creating monthly climate summaries, which it shares with National Weather Service offices and publishes online.

And Kerr said that Joyner and Tollefson have been steadily gaining recognition from local and regional groups, from fellow climatology and weather experts, like the National Weather Service's Tennessee staff, to emergency management planning officials. Joyner said the TCO's data has already helped Sevier County incorporate climate risks into a new hazard mitigation plan it developed, after experiencing devastating wildfires in 2016.



Andrew Joyner, associate professor at ETSU, is pictured while working atop of Roan Mountain in this submitted photo.

Tennessee Climate Office

Services they currently offer

- » Gather climate data for Tennessee and publish monthly and annual reports about it
- » Contribute Tennessee-specific data to the U.S. Drought Monitor
- » Offer context on weather events
- » Hazard mitigation planning
- » Habitat modeling
- » Extreme weather event estimates
- » Risk and suitability modeling
- » Heat-health research
- » Risk and vulnerability assessments

Additional services they want to offer

- » More climate data through a statewide "mesonet," or weather station network
- » Weather forecast hazard index
- » Heat-health vulnerability tool
- » Local community resilience academy
- » Sector-specific products
- » Climate data portal
- » Drought response committee

AASC decided to recognize the TCO in January, not because Joyner and Tollefson had finished a hard, detailed checklist, but because they'd generally reached a good place, Kerr said.

"...all of the chips just seemed to line up," he said. "Part and parcel of [our recognition of them was that] there was also recognition within the East Tennessee State University system, and ... Andrew had established relationships with a series of stakeholders as well. ..."

Now that Tennessee has a state climate office, Joyner said he's pushing to expand the scope of its work. One of his big hopes is to establish a statewide mesonet, which he said could mean a lot more climate data for Tennessee.

"They've got wind

speed, wind direction, they've got temperature at different heights," he said, rattling off the capacity of meso stations. "They have radiation [monitors]; they have ... soil moisture probes at different levels in the soil, so you could look at frost ... and all these other issues related to soil."

Joyner said he and Tollefson are also planning to launch a public-facing website where people can explore the state's climate data. And they've been pushing for more funding.

"Funding is a tough nut to crack. I hate to say it," Kerr said with a dry laugh.

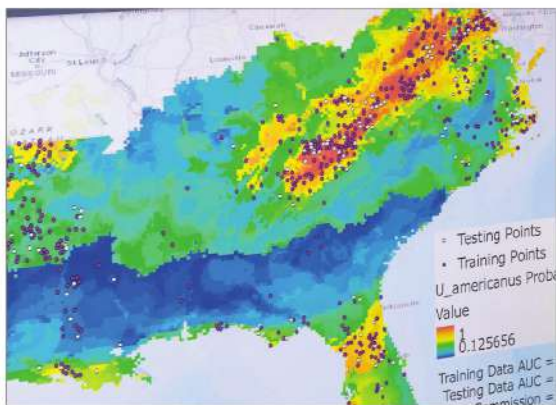
"If you look at the state climate offices across the country, you're going to find varying funding models. ... I think one of the most valuable things [AASC] can do is provide that forum for interaction and networking, so that Andrew can see how other state climate offices are getting funding, and then pursue those models."

With more money, Joyner said he'd like to run what he calls "local community resilience academies": workshops that would train community leaders in Tennessee how to understand and plan for climate-related risks in their areas.

"It could be mayors, it could be emergency managers ... people who are leaders in a community," Joyner said. "We want to do these academies, where we go through some of the data sets that we use ... and basically train them to better understand how to assess their environment and understand their risk and understand how they can become more resilient."

In the meantime, Joyner said he's excited about a much smaller step forward for the TCO: They'll have a grad student working for them this fall.

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Andrew Joyner, with ETSU, shows a map of testing points that are part of his climate research.



Utopia Tattoo & Piercing was founded in 2020, not even a year after co-owner Scotti Lee's heart attack. Owners are husband and wife, Scotti & P.J. Shop manager, licensed tattoo artist and piercer is Jessie Bise. She apprenticed for 2 years and was Scotti's first graduating student. Utopia's goal was to start with hand-picked local artists to train from the ground up to be phenomenal new generation tattoo artists, trained first in bloodborne pathogens and how to handle biohazardous materials for your safety and ours. From opening day we have made all 100's in tattoo and piercing inspections by the state of Tennessee, even during the pandemic. This is not just your father's tattoo shop. This is your entire family's tattoo shop. Stop by today to check out one of our expert body piercers or tattoo artists.

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