Tire Disposal: A Crisis in Kentucky's Waterways

By Michael Washburn

Heron fishing on tire, Ohio River

Kentucky's Red River is our only federally designated "Wild & Scenic River." Yet, each year, as you can see by our accompanying feature on the new KWA-produced documentary *River Cowboys*, KWA and our partners at the Friends of Red River (FORR) pull an astonishing number of tires from the Red. As our Watershed Program Director, Laura Gregory, recently noted on social media, in the space of a few weeks, she and her colleagues removed nearly 200 tires from a four mile stretch of the Red River near Clay City.

This is not just an issue with the Red River. Earlier this year, a KWA board member sent a message to staff. He had enjoyed an overnight paddle on Floyds Fork, but during the middle 10 mile stretch he counted nearly 400 tires.

Four hundred tires in ten miles.
Two hundred tires in four miles.

KWA constantly boasts that Kentucky has 90,000 miles of waterways. Well, in just 14 miles of those waterways there are 600 used, illegally dumped tires, disfiguring the natural beauty of our great state. This visual pollution detracts from the natural beauty of these environments. Trash-filled water bodies not only diminish aesthetic value but also deter tourists and visitors, impacting local economies that rely on tourism and recreational activities.

Tires collected, Green River

Tossing old tires into our waters is not just an act of aesthetic negligence: it's a detrimental practice that has severe consequences for the environment and the communities relying on these water bodies.

Tires contain a variety of toxic chemicals and heavy metals that can leach into the water. These chemicals include benzene, mercury, arsenic, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which pose serious health risks to aquatic life and humans alike. When tires are submerged in water, these pollutants can dissolve and contaminate the entire aquatic ecosystem, affecting fish, plants, and other organisms that rely on clean water to survive. These contaminants can accumulate in the food chain, potentially reaching humans who consume contaminated fish or water.

Wild Turkey with tire, Kentucky River

Beyond that, when dumped into waterways, tires can disrupt natural habitats and ecosystems. They can alter water flow patterns, block passages for aquatic animals, and degrade water quality. Rivers and creeks are essential habitats for numerous species, including fish, amphibians, and insects.

Upper Red River tire cleanup, Photo: Bluegrass Wildwater Association

Tire caught on tree, Green River

Disrupting these ecosystems can lead to declines in biodiversity and even local extinctions, upsetting the delicate balance of nature.

It's important to note that there are proper ways to dispose of old tires including Kentucky's amnesty programs for tires, for instance. But these programs are underfunded, under publicized, and underutilized. This is an important issue, and it will only become more important as we move into an era of increased electric vehicle usage. EV's are much heavier than their gasoline counterparts and burn through tires even faster.

Moving forward, KWA will spend more time addressing this issue of tire pollution, alongside our other work. This year, for example, KWA is providing seed grant funding to Pike County Clean Community Board for the expansion of a tire removal project that began in 2023 to remove an estimated 5,000 waste tires that have been dumped over the years into Levisa Fork, a tributary of the Big Sandy River, located in the City of Pikeville.

To be perfectly frank, individual effort likely can't remedy this situation. Like many things, it takes a community effort, and we hope that you will join us and communities around the state as we try to reduce the number of waste tires in our water.