

Executive Committee Meeting
West Tennessee River Basin Authority
May 20, 2025

The Executive Committee Meeting of the West Tennessee River Basin Authority was held at 9:30a.m. on Tuesday, May 20, 2025, via in-person at the WTRBA office. Executive Committee members in attendance were, Mayor AJ Massey, Mayor Joseph Butler, Mayor Nelson Cunningham, and Dr. Jim Byford. Others attending in person were Executive Director David Blackwood, Paige Keith, Alison Franklin, Kris Gordon, and Dustin Bennett. Mr. Joe McKinnon and Patrick Parker joined via TEAMS. Chairman Massey verified a quorum and called the meeting to order.

The following agenda items were discussed:

USDA-APHIS

Director Blackwood provided an update on staffing challenges affecting the USDA-APHIS Beaver Damage Management Program in West Tennessee. The program, which has supported around 165 active beaver sites, recently lost two field employees and one administrative staff member due to buyouts. These positions will not be replaced, significantly reducing the agency's capacity. With only a few staff remaining, the team is prioritizing only the most critical sites. There is uncertainty about whether additional changes are coming or if administrative support can be restored. Attempts to explore temporary staffing or intern support were not viable under current guidelines. If services shift to the private sector, costs could double. In response, Director Blackwood suggested organizing a meeting to assess site priorities on a county-by-county basis, in collaboration with USDA-APHIS. The committee acknowledged the issue and agreed further planning will be needed as more information becomes available.

Spring Flood Impact & Updates

Director Blackwood provided an update on the impacts of the recent spring flooding and the state's response efforts. The General Assembly approved \$1.2 million in funding to support recovery and preparation for future flood events. Approximately \$900,000 of that total is designated for amphibious trackhoe work along about the river system. Two emergency contracts are in place, and operations are expected to begin in early June, weather permitting. The goal is to have five machines working across West Tennessee through the end of the year. However, Director Blackwood emphasized that the allocated funds will not cover all necessary work, and more resources may be needed. The remaining \$300,000 is earmarked for bank armoring and levee repairs in high-risk areas where river movement or sand deposition could cause significant public impact. Seven to eight priority sites have been identified, though only one has been started due to persistent rainfall, which has delayed progress. The first site is approximately 75% complete. While official spending of the new funds begins July 1, carry-forward maintenance funds have already allowed for some early work to begin. Additional maintenance funds will likely be needed as project costs are expected to exceed initial estimates. Director Blackwood noted growing public concern and frustration due to slow progress, emphasizing that the process is ongoing and heavily dependent on weather conditions. The impact extends beyond Northwest Tennessee, with areas such as Hardin County and Middleton Creek also experiencing significant flooding. Crews are ready to respond as soon as water levels drop.

Special Projects

- Wet Center Groundbreaking
Executive Director of the WET Center, Alison Franklin, reported that the WET Center project is currently in the construction document phase, with planning underway for the bid process. The project will follow a best value bid method due to its complexity, and outreach is ongoing to ensure

qualified contractors are aware of the upcoming opportunity. The major construction contract is expected to begin around October 15th, 2025. Ms. Franklin and David Blackwood proposed moving the October 10th, 2025 WTRBA board meeting to Lone Oaks to coincide with a formal groundbreaking ceremony. The goal is to generate excitement and recognition among stakeholders, including highway officials and state representatives, in hopes of securing future operational funding. The event would follow the model of a successful past gathering, possibly including site tours, demonstrations, and a clay shoot for attendees staying overnight. Recent meetings with the Tennessee Board of Regents and the Institute for Public Service confirmed strong interest in using the center, with multiple partners asking if the space would be large enough to meet demand. Planning is also underway for the exhibit hall, which will include small demonstration models. The team is exploring potential partners that could contribute both exhibits and financial support, possibly with naming opportunities. While construction is expected to continue into 2027, Ms. Franklin stressed the importance of recognizing the support of state leaders before the current administration ends. The committee expressed support for the proposal and agreed to proceed with plans for the October board meeting and groundbreaking event, with flexibility on timing if needed.

- Tennessee Riverbank Stabilization

Director Blackwood provided an informational update on the ongoing Tennessee Riverbank Stabilization effort in partnership with Tennessee Valley Farmers. Congressman Kustoff's office inquired about the scale of the project and potential federal involvement. Staff estimated the total cost at approximately \$50 million. Conversations with NRCS and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are ongoing, and appropriations are being explored. Federal officials have asked whether the agency would be able to receive and execute federal funds directly. After consultation with the agency's budget team and Commissioner Salyers, Director Blackwood confirmed that, provided the funding does not conflict with any state-level requests, the agency would be capable of managing and executing those funds. The project area spans from north of Savannah to Pickwick Dam, where severe riverbank erosion is occurring. A stone toe stabilization method has been identified as the most effective and least environmentally or culturally disruptive solution, confirmed through a successful pilot project. All relevant regulatory agencies have agreed on a streamlined approach that is nearly shovel-ready. While no formal vote was required at this time, Director Blackwood noted that if federal funding is appropriated, the board would later need to vote to formally accept those funds. The update was provided for awareness, and no immediate action was taken.

Outreach

- USACE / ERDC – Vicksburg, MS

Director Blackwood reported on a recent visit to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and the Engineer Research and Development Center (ERDC) in Vicksburg, Mississippi, which he attended with Alison Franklin on May 19. The visit followed a prior meeting with the General of the Mississippi Valley Division and focused on Tennessee's role in the Lower Mississippi River Comprehensive Plan. As Tennessee's appointed representative to this multi-state planning effort, Director Blackwood communicated the state's interests and priorities, emphasizing the need for Tennessee to be well-represented in the planning process. The visit also included a tour of ERDC's engineering research facilities, where they observed physical modeling of rivers, locks, and dams. The group discussed opportunities for collaboration, particularly in exploring a "new start" study of the Obion River watershed. Director Blackwood noted that despite the Corps' Memphis headquarters, physical work in West Tennessee has been limited in recent decades, and there is renewed interest in changing that. Ms. Franklin added that they also met with staff at ERDC's research division to discuss potential modeling support for upcoming WET Center exhibits. The facility confirmed they are speaking with the appropriate contacts and offered to host a follow-up visit at their Massachusetts location to further explore how their modeling processes and water treatment systems

operate. Both Director Blackwood and Ms. Franklin described the visit as highly productive, with strong leadership engagement and promising opportunities for future collaboration.

- One Water Summit – Pittsburgh, PA

Director Blackwood provided an update regarding the annual One Water Summit, which members of the West Tennessee delegation have attended each year. Although he did not initially request to attend due to a scheduling conflict with the July board meeting, he later confirmed that attending only the first two days of the four-day summit would allow him to participate in key sessions and return in time for the board meeting. He requested approval from the committee to proceed with this revised plan. After brief discussion, a motion was made by Dr. Byford and seconded by Mayor Butler to allow Director Blackwood to attend the first two days of the summit. The motion passed with unanimous approval.

- Greenways and Trails Forum

Director Blackwood reported on a recent presentation at the Greenways and Trails forum at Montgomery Bell, focusing on woody debris management in West Tennessee. He highlighted the unique challenges debris poses to safe recreation on local rivers, especially as Blueway designations expand. Increased river use will require greater coordination between enforcement (IWA) and maintenance teams. To address safety concerns, there is growing interest in swiftwater and chainsaw training for water-based debris removal. Plans are underway to support regular training at the WET Center through an operational contract, potentially bringing in \$30,000–\$60,000 annually.

Other Business/Adjourn

Director Blackwood shared that the West Tennessee River Basin Authority was recognized as the **Conservation Organization of the Year** by the **Tennessee Wildlife Federation**. The award was presented at a luncheon held on Friday, May 16th. The leadership team attended the event, which was hosted at the Loveless Café.

With no further business, Chairman Massey asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Mayor Cunningham made the motion with Mayor Butler seconding.

Mayor AJ Massey, Chairman

Joe McKinnon, Secretary

Upcoming meeting:

Executive Committee – June 17th, 2025 @ 9:30am

Board of Directors – July 11th, 2025 @ 11:30am

Executive Committee – August 19th, 2025 @ 9:30am