



CELDF

**COMMUNITY
ENVIRONMENTAL
LEGAL DEFENSE FUND**



living as nature

SEE WHAT'S INSIDE

Frontline Community Action

2025 Happenings

Sneak Peak at 2026

Funding the Mission

CELDF

COMMUNITY
ENVIRONMENTAL
LEGAL DEFENSE FUND

living as nature

ISSUE 4 | 2025

INTRODUCTION

CELDF, our partners, and the folks we work with in frontline communities have been hard at work for 30 years now trying to achieve balance through efforts falling into two categories: resistance to corporate power and injustice, and resilience in the face of systems that don't have our best interests at heart.

And over the last four years, we've expanded our focus, challenging communities to reckon with the truth that we must live from, with,

in, and as nature if we are going to survive what's happening, let alone build a just and biodiverse world.

This past year, our theme has been "living as nature" here at CELDF, and in this newsletter we reflect on our successes, failures, and progress. It's been a busy time.

Whether it is the introduction of a rights of nature [bill in New York](#), working to raise awareness of terrapin habitat loss in Virginia, standing in solidarity with forest

defenders in Washington state, assisting a groundbreaking watershed protection campaign in Oregon, standing up for jaguars and ocelots in Arizona, publishing a new book [Can You Handle the Truth?](#), or working with our partners to educate, agitate, and organize.

We continue to fight for a world in which the rights of nature and community self-determination are at the core of a new way of being. Thank you for your help in this.

SUPPORT THE MOVEMENT CELDF

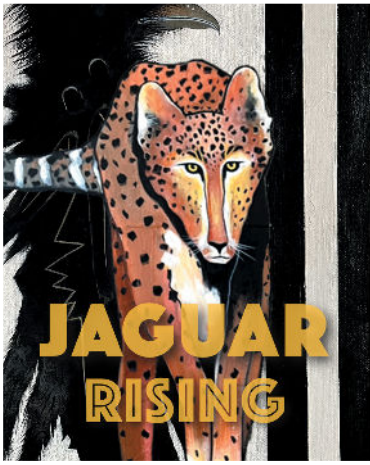
FRONTLINE COMMUNITY ACTION

resilience

CELDF doesn't exist without community. Assisting, guiding, and partnering with communities willing to resist and work on resilience is what keeps us energized. We hope that the Frontline Community Action stories featured here will inspire more communities to get engaged and demonstrate the value of what CELDF brings to these valiant efforts.

Be the Jaguar | Arizona

Ocelots and jaguars are nearly extinct in the United States, but a few still cross the southern border in Arizona's remote [San Rafael Valley](#). In September, construction began on a border wall that will



Artwork by Virginia Maria Romero. Featured on Madrean Archipelago Wildlife Center website

block wildlife completely. What it won't stop is people, since the area isn't used by migrants. Local communities on both sides of the border are fighting back against this "bridge to nowhere" dog-whistle. CELDF is providing support to partners

working to stop this project via consultation, media assistance, networking, and by sending our staff to assist with in-person training and action support. This community support is made possible by CELDF supporters like you.

"Heartfelt thanks and deep gratitude to... the talented team of... the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund. They have been a Force of Nature in [helping to tell] our story of the savagery being unleashed on us with the border wall destruction."

— Kate Scott of the [Madrean Archipelago Wildlife Center](#)

Fighting Chemical Warfare | Oregon

For 70 years, Lane County, Oregon has been under attack from industrial timber corporations destroying forest ecosystems, spoiling watersheds, and poisoning people and fish with toxic chemicals. Even with harms being well-documented, this is all legal.

Despite tragic personal loss, being roadblocked by so-called allies and elected officials alike, and drawing the ire of the corporate timber industry for over 12 years, the "never say die" group that is [Community Rights Lane County](#) continues to do all they can to confront these harms and usher in right-relationship. CELDF assisted with their latest watershed protection initiative ([on the May 2026 ballot](#)) and continues to offer training, consultation, legal advice, and other services to enhance their ability to resist.



Clearcut on the Oregon Coast. Photo by Rio Davidson

"For 13 years, with steadfast guidance and in partnership with CELDF, we've been hard at it, exposing and challenging the view of Nature's role as an "extraction only" resource. Big timber's long-held, out-of-step practices damage our county's water resources, so with assistance from CELDF, we drafted the Lane County Watersheds Bill of Rights to protect our local waters. "

— Michelle Holman,
co-founder of Community
Rights Lane County

Transformative social change takes time. That's why CELDF has been working with communities on the front lines for 30 years. Your financial support makes this possible.

CELDF

uncompromising

2025 HAPPENINGS

Can You Handle the Truth?



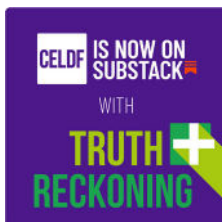
Much of CELDF's work is about exposing lies and getting people to reckon with difficult truths. In the spring we released a new

book, [*Can You Handle the Truth?*](#), a collection of essays about frontline communities, the US Constitution, movement building, and corporate power written by our organizers. CELDF's friend and fellow truth-teller Robert Shetterly, the artist behind the Americans Who Tell the Truth portrait series, wrote the foreword for the book and sat down with CELDF in August for our Truth and Reckoning podcast.

Public Education Platform

In March we launched our new online newsletter, [Truth and Reckoning](#). We publish weekly articles and podcasts from CELDF staff and our network of partners featuring frontline stories from the communities we work with, discussions about rights of nature, and strategic analysis of our movement.

Highlights so far include our coverage of the treesit in Washington, Ben Price's brilliant piece relating homelessness to the enclosure of the commons and Will Falk's exploration of pyrrhic victories in the environmental movement.



Great Lakes and NY Waters Bill of Rights

February 2025 saw a [revised version](#) of this historic bill — with revisions suggested by residents and Indigenous community members — reintroduced in the New York State Assembly by Representative [Patrick Burke](#). CELDF discussed the bill in Toronto at the Great Lakes Symposium in March, and [Rolling Stone Magazine](#), among many other media outlets, featured it in April.

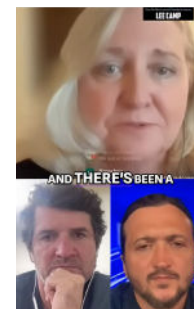


CELDF has been working with community members to educate and organize support for the bill. These efforts have included a podcast conversation with religious women in New York about [Christianity and rights of nature](#), assisting the Western New York Environmental Alliance in creating a webpage providing resources and information on the bill, and a [CELDF-sponsored workshop in August](#) featuring our Partner-Advisors [Camila Vergara](#) (speaking about local democracy and self governance) and [Tzintzun Aguilar-Issso of Talking Wings](#) (talking about their local organizing efforts related to the state bill in the St. Lawrence watershed).

In 2026, we want to keep the momentum going, get more co-sponsors for the bill, and replicate these efforts in new states. We need your support to make this possible.

CELDF Gets Around

Hoarding valuable knowledge is no virtue. That's why CELDF staff prides itself on sharing the experience we've gained over the past 30 years to help others navigate the complicated and often corrupt system in which we find ourselves. This year was no different, as CELDF staff traveled to [Toronto, Canada to present](#) the Great Lakes Bill of Rights; [Ede, Netherlands presenting on the Rights of Wetlands](#); and the Big Apple (NYC) to present at the [NYU More than Human event](#). We attempted to present at the United Nations on rights of nature before it got unexpectedly shut down, and were invited as guest speakers on many diverse platforms such as the [Canadian](#)



CELDF being interviewed on Lee Camp's show Unredacted Tonight

[Association for the Club of Rome](#), [Planet Critical](#), [Lee Camp's Unredacted Tonight](#), PBS Detroit and the [International Degrowth Network](#) to name just a few.

In addition to being guests on other organizations' events, we also hosted a few of our own, including our first-ever live-streamed international conversation, "[Solidarity against Tyranny](#)" bringing together activists from the Philippines and Appalachia to compare and share resistance experiences. Continuing to share our knowledge with others, both in person and virtually, requires funding for travel and production costs.



community

FRONTLINE COMMUNITY ACTION

Death by Data Centers | Nationwide

We get contacted by communities facing fracking, polluting industrial ag, and other sorts of environmental harms almost every day. We do our best to help them all. But lately, we've been receiving more messages about one issue than any other: data centers. These massive facilities power cloud computing, the internet, online video, and AI. Increasingly, they're used for military purposes and mass surveillance. They represent the newest form of industrial harm facing our communities, and they're popping up everywhere. The scale and speed at which data centers are spreading across the country is truly astonishing.



Photo by Nancy Aarestad

CELDF in search of assistance to resist government sanctioned erection of these behemoth industrial projects in rural communities? Because the projects use billions of gallons of water, consume massive amounts of energy, destroy habitat, increase electricity prices, and release light, air and water pollution.

"What happens in one town matters everywhere – when neighbors stand up for transparency and fairness, our environmental resources, and the character of the communities we call home, we protect every person's right to be heard. We're grateful for CELDF and other organizations that walk with us, as they work tirelessly to empower ordinary citizens to take that stand."

– Nancy Aarestad Member of Coalition for Responsible Data Center Development Farmington, MN

Cui Bono? Who benefits from the 4,750 data centers under construction in the U.S.? The ultra-rich – not us, nature, or basic principles like Democracy. Why are so many concerned community members contacting

Water is Everything | New Hampshire

CELDF was contacted by the [Barrington Waterways Protection Committee](#) (BWPC) in Barrington, NH because the community is threatened by a gravel pit. CELDF has worked with the BWPC for over a decade, helping the community to organize and pass a local [rights-based ordinance](#) (RBO) in 2016. The gravel pit operation would harm the local water source and violate Barrington's community RBO. It is unclear whether the Town of Barrington intends to invoke the local rights-based law to protect the people and ecosystems from the gravel pit operation. CELDF is assisting BWPC in resisting the gravel pit operation and protecting the community's right to decide what happens. CELDF's ability to be there over the years is only possible because of donations like yours.



Members of the BWPC with the Isinglass River which covers 75 square miles of watershed and includes tributaries like the Mohawk River and the Nippo Brook.

"We were facing a gravel excavation and granite mining operation in the woods across the street in a residential neighborhood. I happened to tell a client and she said her neighborhood was facing a major water extraction operation that would overlap conservation land. She said, 'call CELDF'. So I did. 24 hours later a rep called me, talked to me, then later came over and schooled us on the law from state to town. Walked us through writing an environmental protection ordinance all the way to being voted in. CELDF takes your struggle as though it were their own. They are an amazing team of environmental advocates for everyone."

– James F. Conley President, BWPC
(Barrington Waterways Protection Committee)

CELDF is committed to supporting communities fighting data centers in whatever ways we can – and your support makes this possible.

CELDF

SNEAK PEAK AT 2026

Call to Action

How bad is our crisis? Why are we in this mess? And most importantly, what the hell can we do about it? These are the important strategic questions that we aim to address in our call-to-action statement, which is being written and reviewed as we speak. This document represents the next evolution of CELDF's strategic framework, and it's all about community action. We look forward to sharing it with all of you.



Adbusters

Truth, Reckoning and Right Relationship Guidebook

It has been 2 years since [Part 1 of our "Truth, Reckoning and Right Relationship with the Great Lakes"](#) gathering took place at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, and a year and a half since [Part 2 took place at moCa Cleveland](#). Ripples from these events continue to spread. Last spring, attendees from these events got together with CELDF's Consulting Director, Tish O'Dell to organize a student-led "Climate and Health" event on the campus of Case Western Reserve University. The event featured tabling from community and student groups, an outdoor activity to ground people in nature, and discussions on issues impacting the future and how to address them. This year, Tish is working with students



from multiple universities in the Cleveland area on a *Truth and Reckoning* event focused on education.

Based on what CELDF has learned from these events, we plan to publish a *Truth, Reckoning, and Right Relationship Guidebook* to help communities across the country bring people together as a catalyst for action.

If this is a project you support, please consider making a donation.

250 Year Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence

CELDf will be working hard throughout the coming year to correct the distorted history that will be coming to a school and fairground near you. Donald Trump announced there will be a traveling "[Great American State Fair in celebration of America's 250th birthday](#)", beginning at the Iowa State Fair and traveling to other state fairs throughout 2026. In addition, what's left of the U.S. Department of Education has formed an [America 250 Civics Education Coalition](#), composed of 41 conservative groups who have stated they are "dedicated to renewing patriotism, strengthening civic knowledge and advancing a shared understanding of America's founding principles in schools across the nation." They may want to start by acknowledging it's the 250th anniversary of the [Declaration of Independence](#), a revolution against autocracy, not the birth of the U.S. nation-state. Ratification of the counter-revolutionary Federalists' U.S. Constitution won't be celebrated (if it is) for another 13 years in 2039.

State of Rights of Nature Status Report

More and more people, organizations, and governments are considering [Rights of Nature](#) as a method to protect what's left of our planet Earth. This is good news — but, as with every tactic that threatens capitalism, there is real danger that Rights of Nature will be co-opted by those in power and rendered toothless. We are already seeing this happening around the world, from efforts to get "nature on the Board" of corporations and the watering down of rights of nature into symbolic resolutions, to the banning of rights of nature laws in multiple states and ongoing attempts to revoke Ecuador's constitutional rights of nature protections. To combat assaults on the integrity of the Rights of Nature paradigm, CELDF is preparing a report that will offer an overview of recent Rights of Nature news and will assess whether recent developments represent real progress or dangerous compromise. Not all news claiming to advance the rights of nature actually does so. Look for this report in early 2026.



Illustration by Blake Lavia

organizers

FRONTLINE COMMUNITY ACTION



Never Give Up | Ohio

Our allies in Ohio lead by example, showing incredible determination and persistence. From Williams County, where communities have [battled water withdrawals](#) for bottling, a [GMO fish factory](#), and industrial agriculture, to Youngstown, where the people have fought off [fracking injection wells](#), oil and gas drilling, and now battle a [tire- and plastic-incineration facility](#), these organizers have been relentless. In Cincinnati, resistance is strong, where a community group educates residents about rights



Members of CROW (Citizens for Rights of the Ohio River Watershed) Jim Schenk, Jessica Schultz and Susan VonderHaar

of nature, circulating petitions for the Ohio River Bill of Rights, despite a law passed by the state legislature making it illegal. In Columbus, the state's capitol and largest city, organizers have attempted to add community rights initiatives to the ballot five times, but have been blocked again and again by government and the courts. They are now proposing a [local charter amendment](#) to make preemption of the local community by state and federal governments illegal — as long as the local law is expanding rights and protections for human or non-human life. CELDF continues to support all of these communities.

of nature, circulating petitions for the Ohio River Bill of Rights, despite a law passed by the state legislature making it

"As a presenter and an advocate on community rights and rights of nature, I rely heavily on the work of CELDF and its arsenal of resources to guide others on this transformational journey. We are creating a new world; one heart and one mind at a time."

Susan VonderHaar



Members of Columbus Community Rights at ComFest 2025 tabling and collecting signatures to get their charter amendment on a 2026 ballot. (Greg Pace, Kathy McGlone, Carolyn Harding and Bill Lyons)

"If all political power is inherent in the people - as stated in the Ohio Constitution - then the people in Columbus must have the right to decide on issues, locally, for their health, safety, and welfare, and not be preempted by state overreach. That is what we are fighting for - to realize our local, community self-governing rights."

Bill Lyons

The Ohio motto of "We don't lose until we quit" has never been more evident. CELDF needs your support to be able to continue assisting these efforts.

CELDf

—allegiance

Nurturing Community Roots Through Our Partners



CELDF Partner
Dina Gilio-Whitaker



Artwork by CELDF Partner
Blake Lavia of Talking Wings

CELDF works with a broad spectrum of brilliant partners around the world. One of these is Dina Gilio-Whitaker (Colville Confederated Tribes descendant), author of the 2019 book [*As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock*](#). Dina's new book, [*Who Gets to Be Indian? Ethnic Fraud, Disenrollment, and Other Difficult Conversations About Native American Identity*](#), was released in October. A second partner is Denzel Caldwell, an organizer with [*Nashville Black Assembly*](#) and the [*Highlander Center*](#). And another is [*Talking Wings*](#), an ecocentric storytelling collective based in the St. Lawrence River Watershed. Dina's brilliant insights and academic work, Denzel's extensive experience organizing against what he calls "the rise of the neo-confederacy," and the innovative creations of Talking Wings, such as their newly released rights of nature toolkit, bring new ideas and opportunities for collaborative action into our sphere.



Artwork by CELDF Partner Blake Lavia of Talking Wings

FUNDING THE MISSION

\$5 million in 5 Years

As we close out the year, all of us at CELDF want to extend our deepest gratitude to you, our supporters, partners, and friends. Your generosity sustains our mission every single day. Because of you, we can answer calls from across the country when a new environmental harm looms, offering expert consultation and legal education. Your support directly powers our ability to stand up for communities like your own, defending your rights and the rights of nature.

Like many groups, CELDF faced a challenging fundraising year in

2025. Your continued commitment makes it possible for us to persevere. As we look ahead, we are redoubling our focus on fundraising in 2026 to ensure that our invaluable assistance remains available to all who need it, free of charge.

Providing trusted, accessible expertise to communities on the frontlines of environmental and democratic struggles is our top priority. To meet our 2026 goals, we need your help once again. Please consider becoming a [*monthly donor*](#). Your steady support provides a reliable foundation for our year-round work.

MAKE YOUR MONEY COUNT!

CELDF

You can give securely online at [CELDF.org](https://celdf.org), send a donation using the enclosed envelope, or mail a check to CELDF at P.O. Box 360, Mercersburg, PA 17236. Our donation page on the website also includes options for estate planning and gifts of stock. We also welcome contributions through Donor Advised Funds. Every gift, large or small, helps us make this critical work possible. Thank you for standing with us over the past 30 years and making a lasting difference.



give