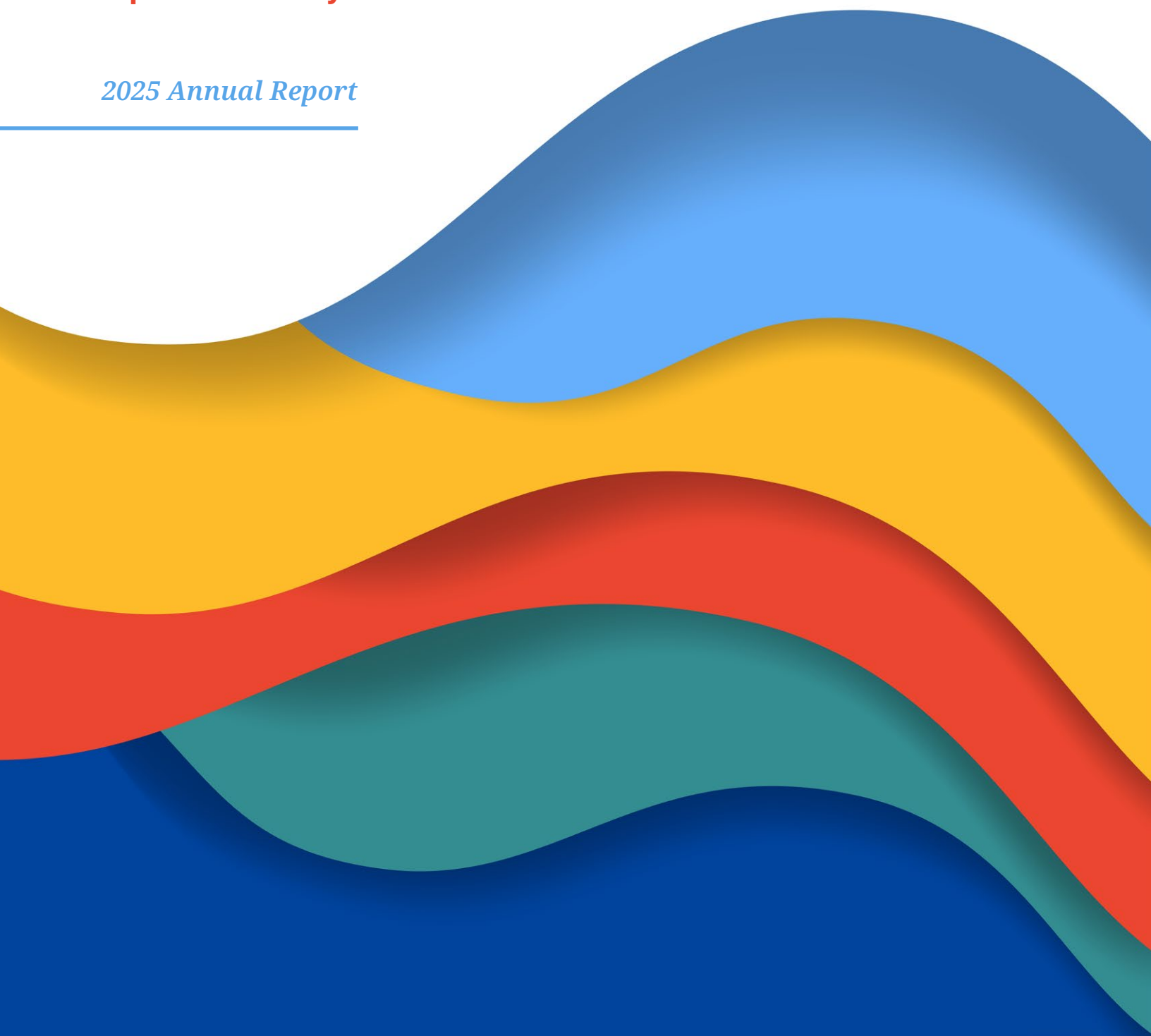


Flowing Forward

Aquifer Advocacy in Action

2025 Annual Report



Letter from the Director

If we had to describe 2025 in water terms, it was like a river at flood stage — fast moving, turbulent at times, overflowing the banks, but flowing forward in the same direction. We strengthened education and advocacy toolkits (you must check out the Contamination Dashboard), supported community members as they took action, and continued building pathways for people to engage with decisions that affect the Memphis Sand Aquifer. These efforts don't always make headlines, but this is how durable change is made. This is how momentum is sustained.



2025 required us to adapt. The policy and regulatory landscape continues to shift. Funding streams changed. Promising opportunities — including a major federal Community Change Grant — were unexpectedly terminated. Those moments were frustrating, but they also clarified something important: Protect Our Aquifer's work is not dependent on a single grant, a single issue, or a single moment. It is rooted in shared values.

In 2020, while working at the University of Memphis, I led a countywide survey that found **95% of Shelby County residents said clean drinking water is a right**. I left the university, but that number stayed with me. It's a belief carried by everyone at Protect Our Aquifer.

And yet, believing something is a right does not make it guaranteed.

Rights must be protected. They must be understood. Our Aquifer must be defended by a community that knows what is at stake and knows how to engage with regulators, elected officials, and decision-makers. That is why our work centers on education and consensus-building — finding where our shared values can lead to structural change.

In 2025, we helped advance the Colossus Water Recycling Plant and two new laws that move us closer to long-term groundwater protection. These wins did not happen overnight. They came from years of patient relationship-building, science-based advocacy, and community leadership.

Because of you, we are gaining momentum. This work is ever-evolving, but it is grounded in something constant: the belief that informed communities can shape better outcomes, and that protecting our aquifer is both possible and necessary. **Thank you for flowing forward with us.**

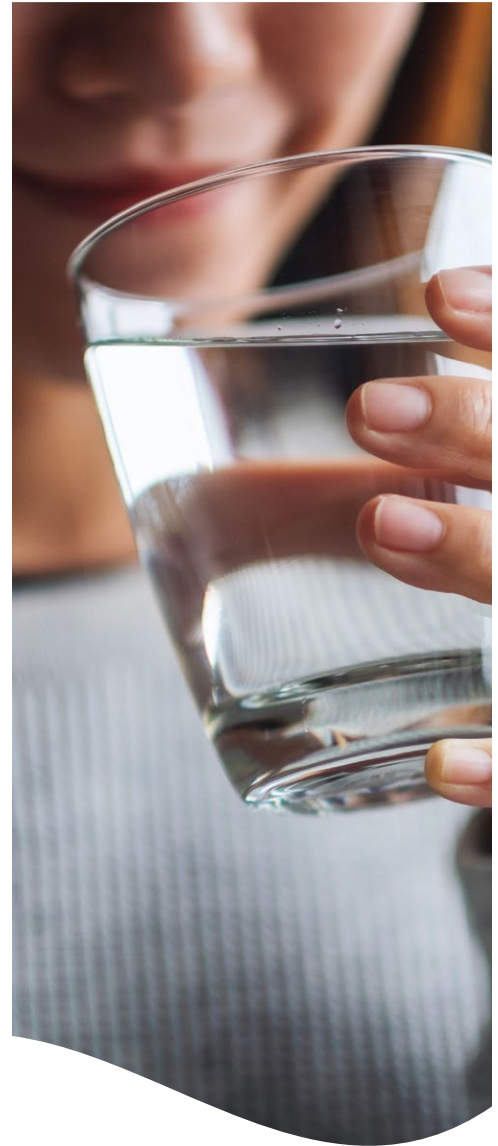
With gratitude and determination,

Sarah Houston

Executive Director, Protect Our Aquifer

Table of Contents

- 4** **2025 By the Numbers**
- 6** **Widespread**
Building Community & Technical Allyship
- 10** **From Investigation to Action**
Holding xAI Accountable
- 12** **Democratizing Data**
The Contamination Dashboard
- 14** **Cracking the Well Code**
Strengthening our Groundwater Board
- 16** **Drafting the Guides**
One Water Handbook & The Blue Print
- 18** **Protecting the Laws of the Land**
Local & State Legislation
- 20** **Our Regional Voice**
The West TN H2O Delegation
- 22** **Setting the Course**
POA in 2026 and Beyond
- 24** **Financials & Donors**



2025 by the Numbers

Residential Action



4,888

individuals reached through interactive aquifer presentations



150

guests attended our Water Wednesday Happy Hours



18

Water Warriors completed our intensive 10-week advocacy training



Digital Action



232,103

viewers reached via our "Water Wednesday" educational video series



30%

increase in subscribers to our educational newsletter about priority aquifer issues





Civil Action



403

action emails sent to decision makers,
advocating for aquifer protections



68

public comment letters submitted
by POA and community members on
regulatory matters



52

mentions in local and national
media outlets



2

Groundwater Protection
Laws passed



Tennessee

TN state legislators from both sides of
the aisle engaged on wetlands



Widespread

Building Community & Technical Allyship

Leadership in Action for – and with – North Memphis:

Community building remained at the heart of POA's work in 2025. Over the course of the year, we reached 4,888 people through in-person events across Memphis and West Tennessee. Our team presented at 64 events, and delivered 25 “Aquifer 101” sessions to help residents understand what threatens our water and how to protect it.

We also created more spaces for connection: our Water Wednesday Happy Hours engaged over 150 attendees, taking us from the Recharge Zone's Williamson Farm to aboard the Living Lands & Waters Mississippi River barge. Whether through a whiskey barrel sponsorship with Old Dominick or a formal presentation, this work is about building the shared responsibility needed to sustain a long-term movement.



Water Warriors: Training Frontline Leaders

We deepened our 10-week advocacy program, training 18 new Water Warriors. With 72% of the cohort from frontline communities and 42% from North Memphis, these leaders are equipped to navigate the heavy industrial landscape of their own backyards.



The AquiFair: Education Through Celebration

At the Juneteenth Douglass Freedom Festival, the 2024 Water Warriors cohort hosted the first-ever “AquiFair.” From serving 600 “edible aquifer” sundaes to leading immersive data walks and creating aquifer mosaics, our graduates used art and education to highlight local groundwater threats.



Toxic Tours: Seeing the Stakes

We led four “Toxic Tours” over Juneteenth weekend, guiding residents through sites like the North Hollywood Dump and Velsicol Chemical. These tours provided the history of contamination and, more importantly, the tools for residents to advocate for clean-ups.



Velsicol & Cypress Creek: From Comments to Clout

When Velsicol proposed a bankruptcy settlement, we collaborated with The Time Is Now Douglass to submit a 10-page technical comment backed by 49 resident signatures. We also helped Hollywood/Hyde Park neighbors access Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) soil sampling to address legacy toxic chemical concerns.



Fullen Dock: Protecting Environment & Labor

POA successfully advocated for soil testing at Fullen Dock before the dredging of Mississippi River sediments. After our comments prompted TDEC to act, unsafe dioxin levels were discovered, leading to a ban on the sale of those sediments and protecting both workers and the public.

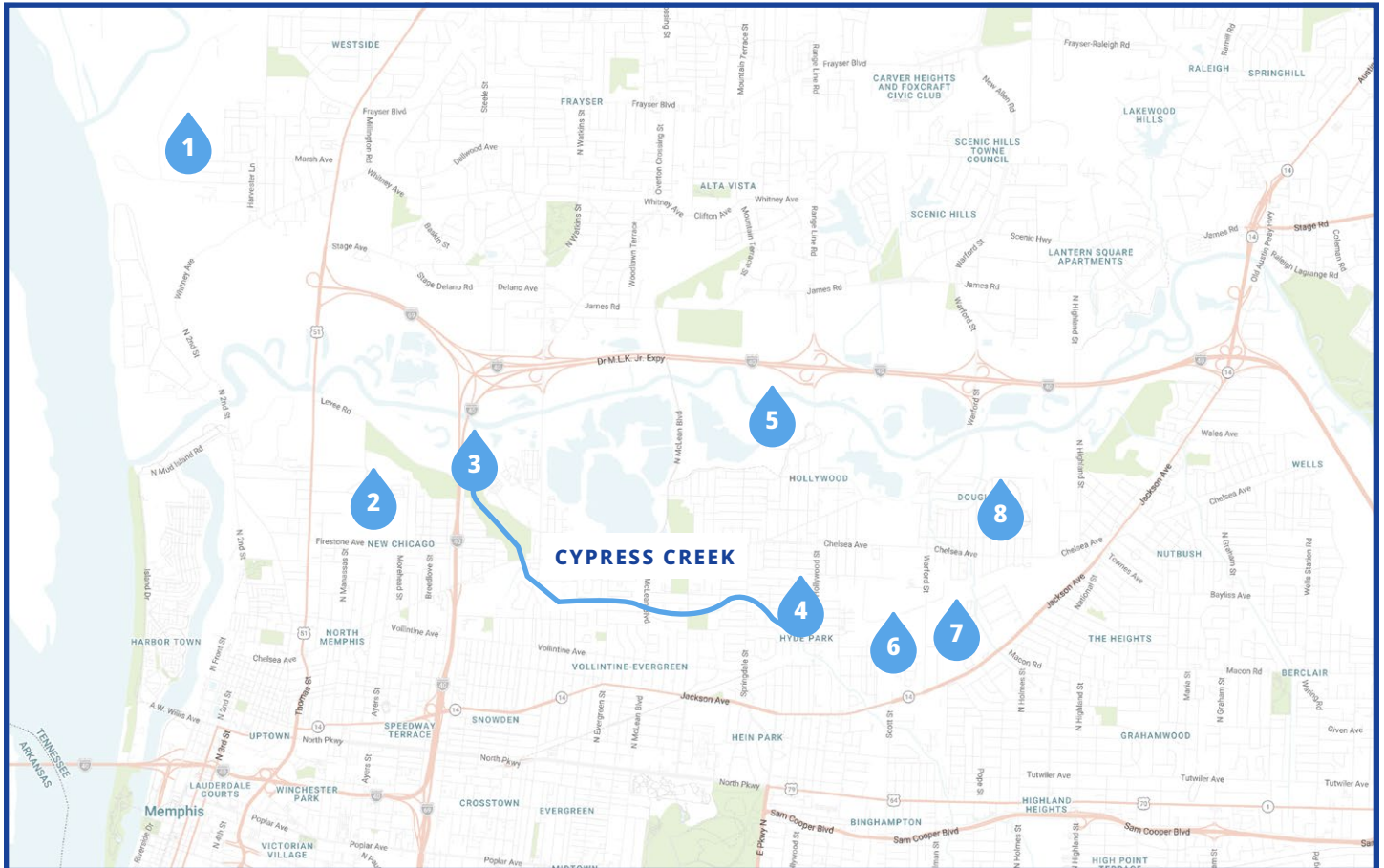


Firestone: Halting the Jail Proposal

When a new jail was proposed for the Firestone brownfield, POA activated our “technical allyship.” By researching land-use restrictions and existing legacy pollution plumes, we provided community leaders with the science-based justification needed to defeat the proposal and protect the site’s future.

Map of North Memphis

Action Areas



North Memphis: Velsicol bankruptcy settlement advocacy

Cypress Creek: Community soil sampling

Douglass Park: Juneteenth Freedom Festival "AquiFair"

Fullen Dock: Dioxin soil testing and remediation

Klondike/Smokey City: Preventing a jail on the Firestone brownfield

1 Fullen Dock & Warehouse

2 Former Firestone Site

3 End of Cypress Creek

4 Start of Cypress Creek

5 Hollywood Dump

6 Velsicol

7 Part of Toxic Tour (PMC Biogenix)

8 Douglass Park (AquiFair)



**Bobby Rush and other musicians at the annual
Acoustic Sunday Live! fundraiser in December.**

From Investigation to Action

Holding xAI Accountable

In 2025, POA leveraged the public land sale process and environmental permitting to ensure that xAI's commitment to a \$200M+ water reuse facility wasn't just a headline. This facility has the potential to move xAI Colossus 1 and its neighbor, TVA, off the aquifer entirely. But as history has shown, a verbal commitment is not a facility on the ground. We created legal and regulatory opportunities to ensure this project becomes a reality.

POA v. xAI in 2025

FEBRUARY TO MARCH

Securing the Safety Net

As xAI moved to purchase city land for its reuse facility, POA identified a rare window for public intervention. We used early legislative delays to advocate for "reversion clause" and "right of first refusal" language. By the time the City Council voted (12-0) in March, the deal included these vital legal protections: if the facility isn't built, the city — and its people — have negotiating power to get the land back.

APRIL TO MAY

Demanding a Seat at the Table

When TDEC released the State Operating Permit (SOP), the communities of Westwood and Boxtown were largely in the dark. POA mobilized, helping residents navigate the complex technical documents. Together, we submitted 28 formal requests for a public hearing. TDEC granted the request, opening a critical door for the community to speak directly to regulators.

JUNE

The Community Takes the Lead

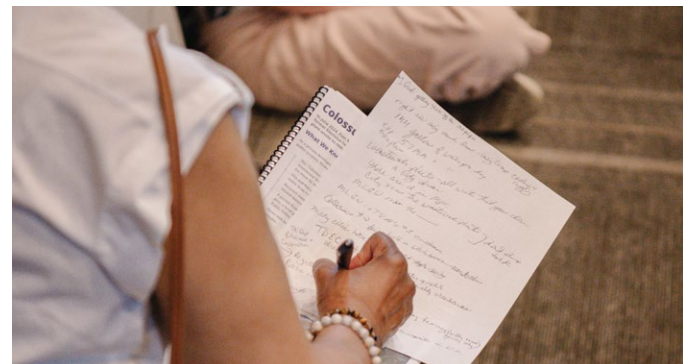
Before the official TDEC hearing, POA and Young, Gifted & Green hosted two "Aquifer Action Meetings" to prep neighbors on the science of wastewater treatment and listen to community concerns. Armed with facts, the community showed up to the TDEC hearing in force. POA submitted a comprehensive technical comment letter, ensuring that the final permit would be held to the highest environmental standards.



JULY TO SEPTEMBER

Monitoring the Groundwork

As site preparation began in Southwest Memphis, POA shifted into “Watchdog Mode.” We moved from the Council Chambers to the field, monitoring the physical progress of the site. Our role transitioned to ensuring that the early promises of sustainability weren’t buried under the rush of construction.



OCTOBER TO DECEMBER

Sustaining the Pressure

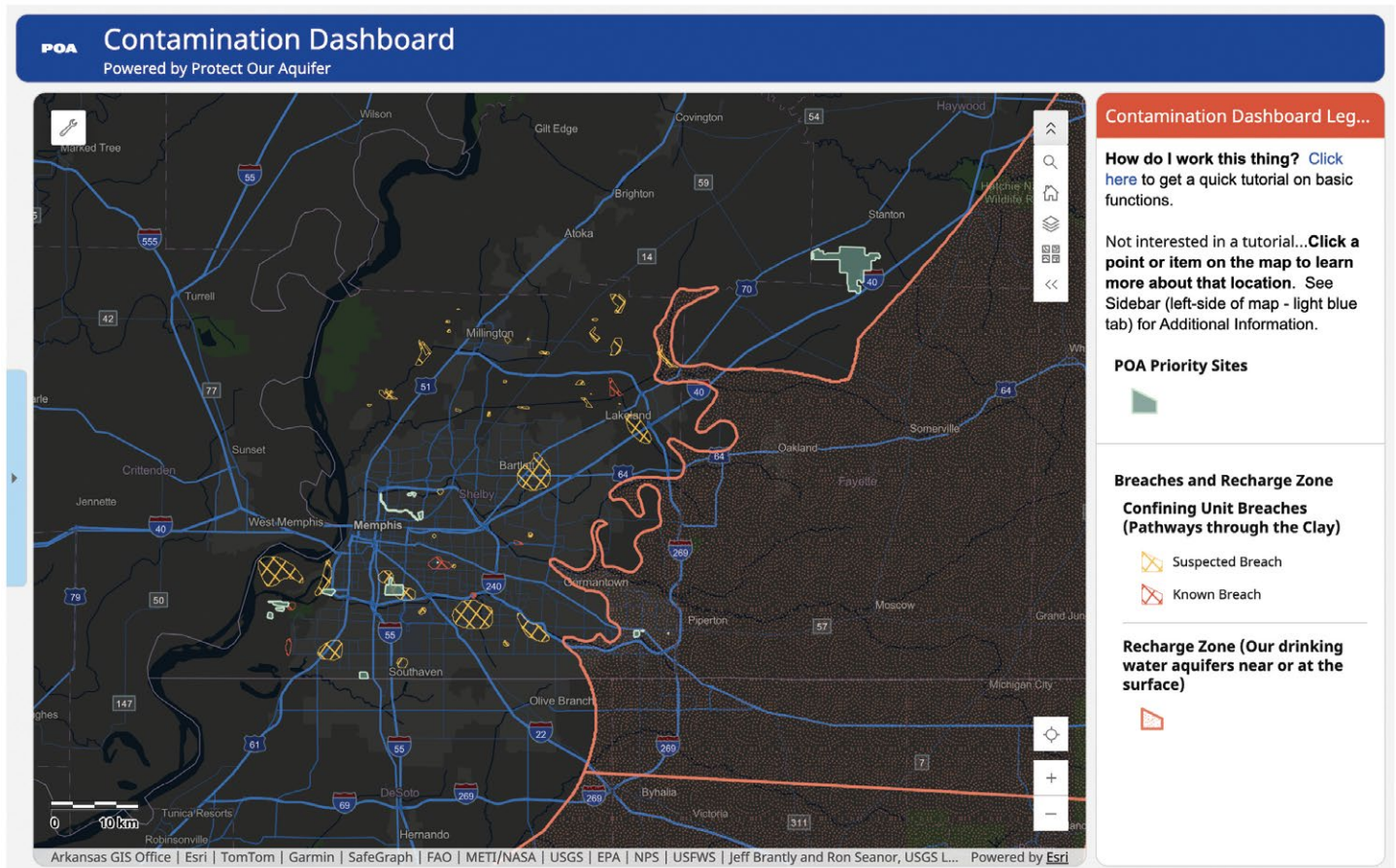
Groundbreaking ceremonies are for photos; long-term advocacy is for results. Following the official ceremony, POA sent formal correspondence to Memphis Public Works leadership regarding the required contract to sell wastewater to the water reuse facility. We have created our seat at the table to ensure the final agreement protects Memphis’ infrastructure, community, and its most precious liquid asset.



Democratizing Data

The Contamination Dashboard

Historically, groundwater data has been scattered across government websites or hidden in unpublished files. In 2025, we released the Contamination Dashboard, an online resource that overlays data from TDEC, the EPA, and the USGS and others into one accessible map. By putting science-based knowledge in the hands of the community, we lower the barriers to advocacy.



Search Your Address & Explore the Dashboard

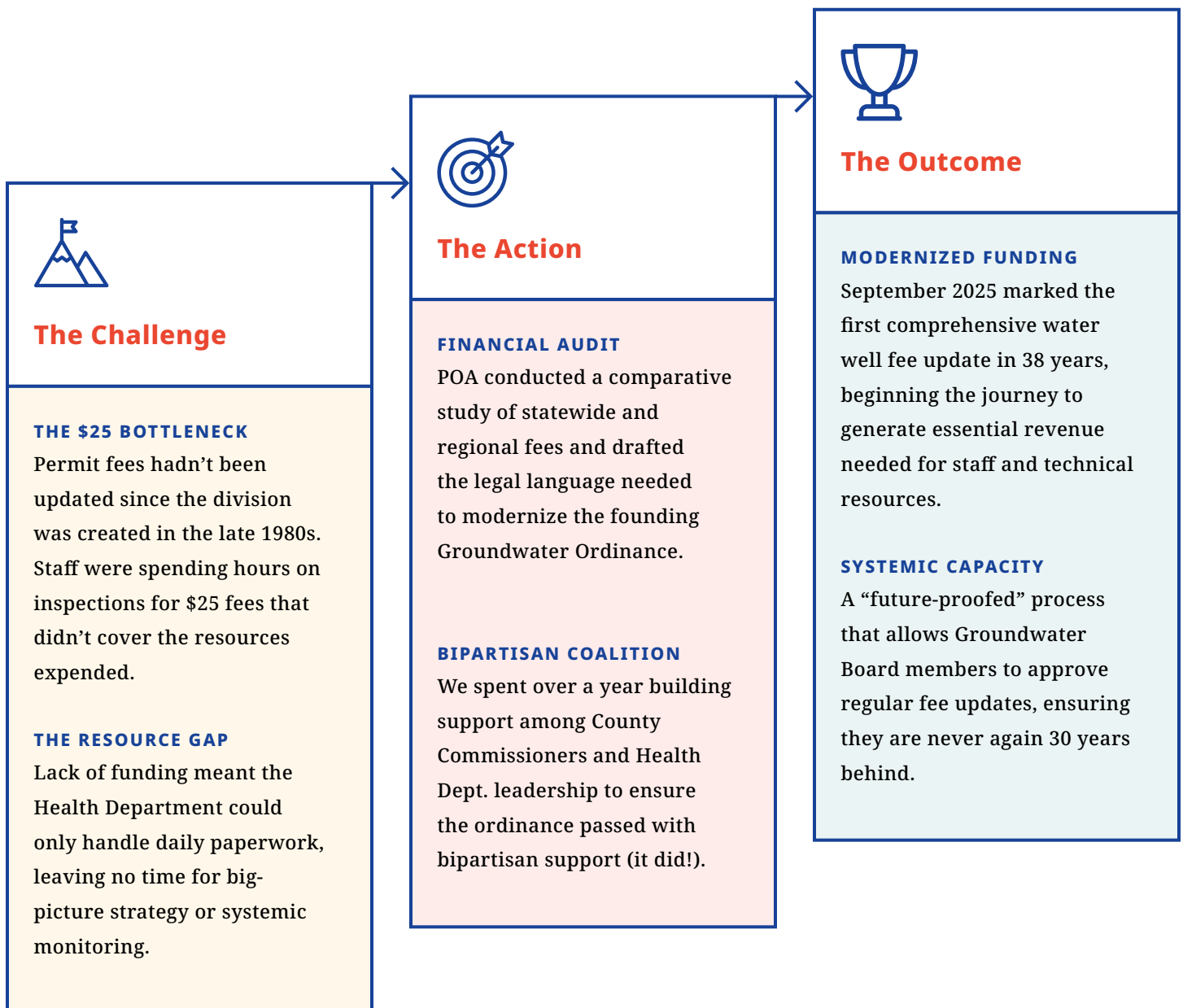
PROTECTOURAQUIFER.COM/RESOURCES



Cracking the Well Code

Strengthening our Groundwater Board

Since 2017, POA has worked to identify the bottlenecks holding back our local regulators. For the Shelby County Groundwater Board (housed within the Shelby County Health Department), the answer was clear: chronic underfunding. By modernizing the Well Code and County Ordinance, we're shifting from a system of barely getting by to one of proactive protection.



Policy work is a marathon, not a sprint.

Even incremental wins take time. Raising basic fees required over a year of data, drafting, and advocacy. But this is how POA helps build a government that is actually capable of protecting the aquifer for the long haul.



Drafting the Guides

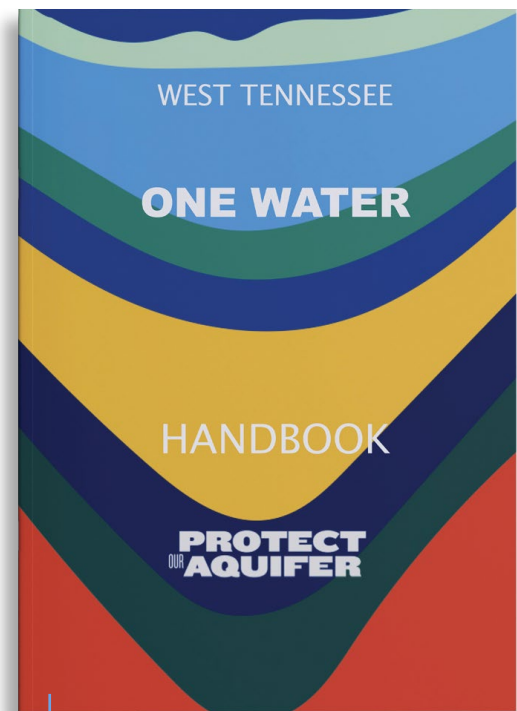
One Water Handbook & The Blue Print

We've realized that access to information has been a huge barrier to communities and decision makers — even when they want to do right by our aquifer. Through general operating support over the past two years, the POA team has been researching and writing two critical guides. These guides are separate but parallel efforts to turn technical data into easy-to-understand language so everyone can play a role in aquifer protection.

The One Water Handbook: Guiding Smart Growth

As West Tennessee grows, protecting the aquifer and its recharge zone requires proactive planning. In 2025, POA partnered with regional design and engineering experts to develop the West TN One Water Handbook. This guide aims to serve as a practical resource for planners and developers, ensuring that best practices for groundwater protection are baked into the region's growth from the very beginning.

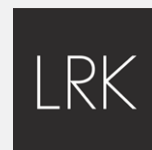
We know a handbook for the region had to be informed by the people who live there. Throughout 2024–2025, we held a series of listening sessions across Recharge Zone communities. These conversations gave us invaluable insight into residents' relationships with their land and water. These local perspectives ensure that the handbook doesn't just meet technical standards, but reflects the values and needs of the people of West Tennessee.



The West TN One Water Handbook will be officially rolled out in 2026.

One Water Handbook Partners

We didn't build this handbook in a vacuum. POA collaborated with a powerhouse team of regional experts who are already on the front lines of planning West Tennessee's expansion.



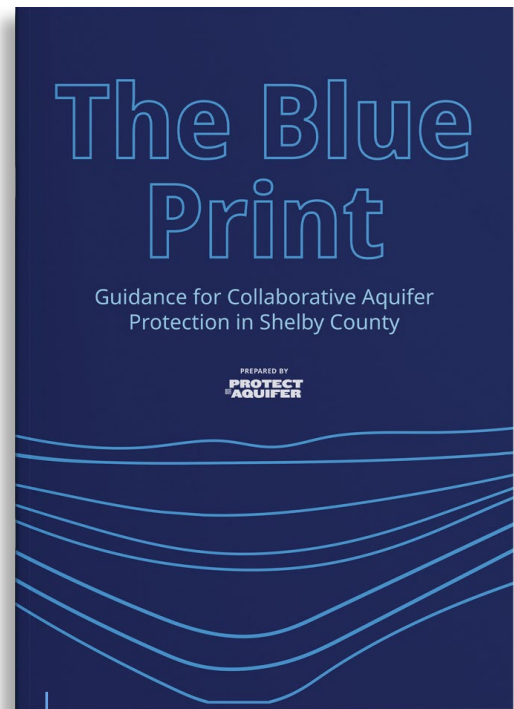


The Blue Print: **Building Groundwater Stewardship**

There is ample information on our groundwater in Shelby County. But it is buried in federal reports, student dissertations, and technical databases. After years of advocating with the Groundwater Board, we knew that compiling resources and telling the story of our aquifer threats could make the proposed solutions that much more possible.

The Blue Print — a comprehensive, first-of-its-kind guidance to a groundwater protection plan — will be officially released in 2026. It translates complex aquifer science, policies, and threats into accessible, actionable tools for all walks of life, empowering our community to drive crucial decisions about our drinking water.

POA spent ample time in 2025 researching, writing, and revising this critical information to put it directly into your hands. We want the people to drive the aquifer decisions at this moment. With these guidelines easily accessible, you have the power to act on them and protect our shared water future. We can be a regional example, but it requires everyone to have the right information.



The Blue Print will be officially rolled out in 2026.

Protecting the Laws of the Land

Local & State Legislation

At the Local Level...

As BlueOval City impacts the landscape of West Tennessee, the risks to the Memphis Sand Aquifer have increased. In response to concerns shared by residents, we conducted independent sampling of drinking water wells near the site to provide the community with a baseline of safety.

Beyond sampling, we served as an ally to the Megasite Authority leading to the development and passage of a Megasite Wellhead Zoning Law. This crucial legislation codifies onsite zoning regulations designed to prevent industrial spills or contamination from ever reaching the aquifer. This is the first industrial wellhead protection law in the State of Tennessee!

At the State Level...

In 2025, the fight for protection of Tennessee's isolated wetlands came to a head. After the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Sackett v. EPA* attempts to strip our state law became a real possibility when a bill poised to roll back nearly all protections. POA joined a diverse statewide coalition in 2024 including farmers, hunters, and conservationists to maintain as many protections as possible.



Our Impact at the Capitol:



SCIENTIFIC TESTIMONY

Two years of legislative outreach, relationship building, and testimony in committee, both Executive Director Sarah Houston and Science Director Dr. Scott Schoefernacker grounded the debate in hydrologic reality.

STRATEGIC AMENDMENTS

While the primary bill passed, our coalition's advocacy and public pressure forced several key amendments that reduced the negative impact of the bill.

SUSTAINING PROTECTIONS

These efforts ensured that a significant portion of statewide wetland protections remained intact — especially critical for West Tennessee where wetlands filter and recharge the aquifer — keeping our groundwater clean.

“95% of Shelby County residents believe clean drinking water is a right. Our advocacy at the State Capitol is about ensuring that right is backed by law.”

— SARAH HOUSTON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Our Regional Voice

The West TN H₂O Delegation

In 2025, we not only expanded the West TN H₂O Delegation, we brought it to the national stage at the One Water Summit in Pittsburgh, PA.

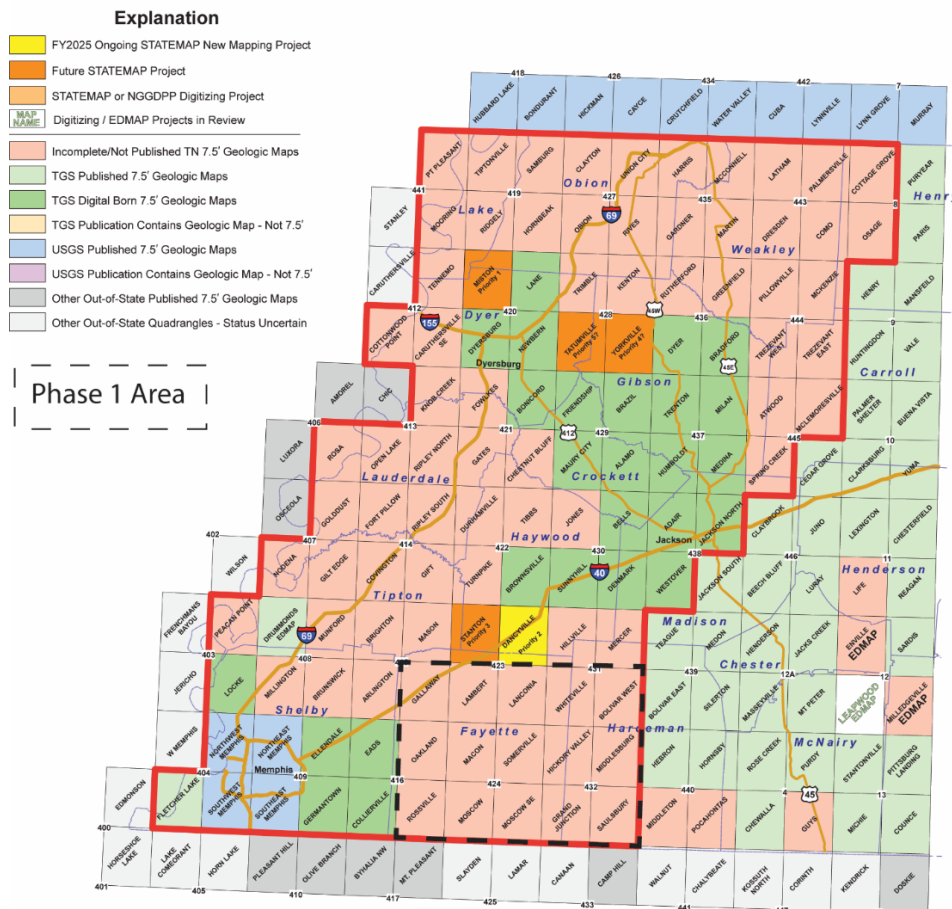
This gathering allowed our local leaders to learn from water innovators across the country. POA's leadership was recognized on a national level as we were invited to join a featured panel on data centers. We shared our experience navigating the xAI development in Memphis to a packed house of national water experts, positioning West Tennessee as a leader in industrial water accountability.



Back at home, the Delegation, composed of state and federal agencies, agricultural, utility, and environmental organizations, focused on addressing a critical information gap with the Tennessee Geological Survey.

Despite West TN's total reliance on subsurface groundwater, much of the region remains geologically unmapped. There are 76 "quadrangles" left to map in West TN, and at the current pace of 1-2 per year, we won't have a full picture of our aquifer until 2086! Nearly all of Middle and East TN have been mapped — for decades. Together, we assembled a strategy to map these areas faster, with POA leading state-level advocacy to fund a 3-year jumpstart in 2026.

Status of 1:24,000 Scale Geologic Mapping in Tennessee - 2025 Tennessee Geological Survey



**WEST
TENNESSEE
MAPPING
INITIATIVE**

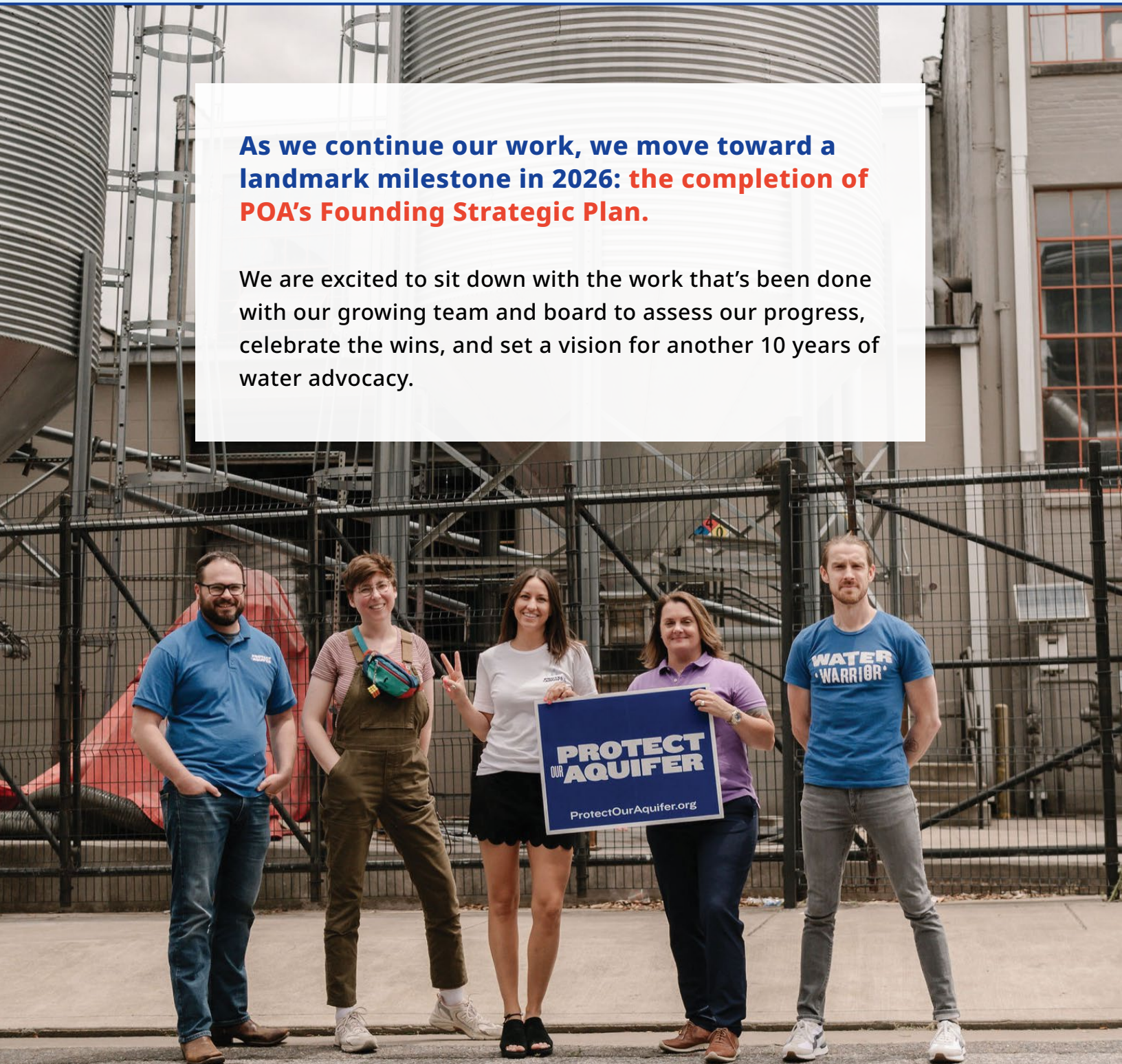
Status of surface geology mapping in West TN with Phase One outlined.

Setting the Course

POA in 2026 and Beyond

As we continue our work, we move toward a landmark milestone in 2026: **the completion of POA's Founding Strategic Plan.**

We are excited to sit down with the work that's been done with our growing team and board to assess our progress, celebrate the wins, and set a vision for another 10 years of water advocacy.

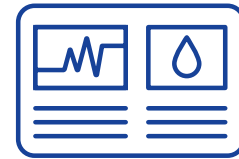


2026 Goals



Community Planning

Pilot a community-led Groundwater Protection Plan in the Alcy Ball neighborhood.



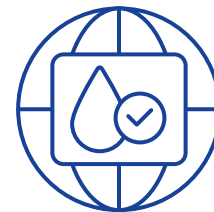
Formal Guidance

Release two critical documents: *The Blue Print* and the *One Water Handbook*



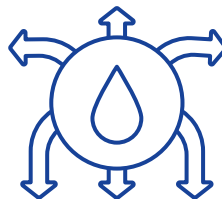
Public Engagement

Host quarterly Water Wednesday Happy Hours and expand Toxic Tours to create a space for water lovers from all walks of life to come together.



Strategic Vision

Release a new 10-year POA Strategic Framework guided by successful strategies and community input.

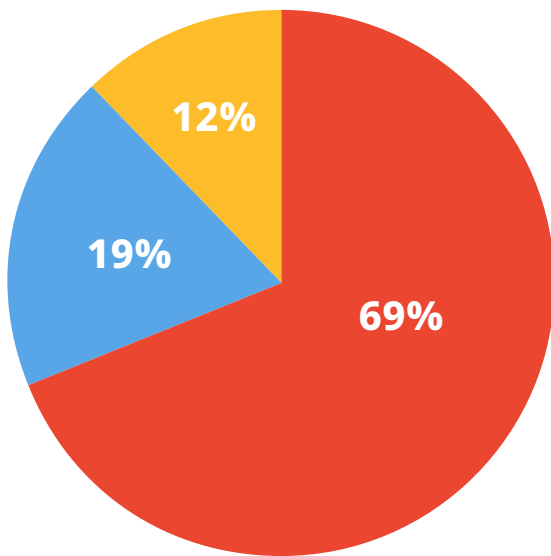


Accountability

Serve as a watchdog and community connector to ensure xAI Colossus #1 & TVA stop relying on the Memphis Sand Aquifer.

2025 Organization Financials

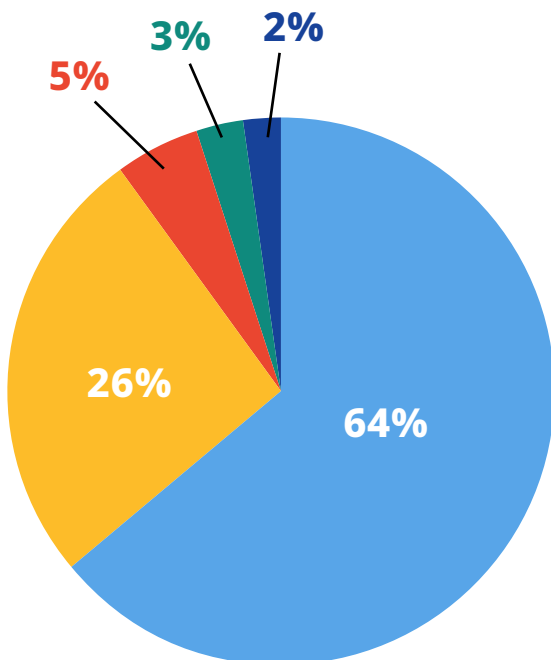
Our Financial Highlights from 2025



2025 Expenses

- Direct Programs
- Management
- Fundraising

Total Expenses: \$736,169



2025 Revenue

- Grants
- Annual Fund
- Fundraiser Events
- Investment Return
- Sponsorships

Total Revenue: \$858,907



100%

of POA Board Members
gave in 2025.

Monthly donor base is growing,
with gifts ranging from \$5 to
\$100 every 30 days.



6-Month Operating Reserve Met!

Surplus funds ensure that we are
successfully maintaining a reserve fund
for sustainable operation.



Commitment to Minority-Owned Businesses

In 2022, we set a goal to spend 30%
of vendor and consultant dollars with
local, minority-owned businesses.
We spent \$90,413 or 36% of eligible
expenses in 2025 — exceeding our
target for the year.



For every \$1 raised, we spent a
dime fundraising — well below the
standard nonprofit fundraising
efficiency ratio of 20-35%.

Thank you to our 2025 donors!

\$100,000+

Amy P. Goldman Foundation
Anonymous Foundation
Hyde Family Foundation
Kevin & Melissa McEniry
Robert & Vicki Baird
The Assisi Foundation of Memphis
The Funders Network

\$10,000–29,999

Elizabeth J. Gilliland
Henry Turley
James S. & Kathryn Gilliland
John Buford
Pam & McNeal McDonnell
The Hohenberg Foundation, Inc.

\$30,000–50,000

Acoustic Sunday Live! (Bruce & Barbara Newman)
Amy & Bill Rhodes
Christian Community Foundation of Memphis
PolicyLink

\$5,000–9,999

Allison & Andrew F. Cates
Carol Roberts
Frank & Jeanne Jemison
Goldsmith Family Foundation
Lichterman Loewenberg Foundation
Margaret Turley
Meg & Scott Crosby
Old Dominick Distillery Glass Half Full

Aquifer Advocate Circle (\$500+)

All of the above and...

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Barret Matthews
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Bill & Suzanne Landers
Carl & Ardys Richards
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Cecile Frazier Skaggs
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Tina Steelman Duckels
Tyler & Meatha Tapley
Walter & Doris Battle
Ward & Linda Archer
Wight F. Boggs

And thank you to everyone who contributed in 2025 regardless of amount. Your support is critical because every dollar counts!



**Thank You to Our Water Wednesday
Happy Hour Sponsors**

**OLD
Dominick**
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PROTECT OUR AQUIFER

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Scott Schoefernacker, PhD, PD
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Mersadies Burch
Operations Director

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West TN Organizer

Rheannan Watson
Advocacy Coordinator

Daniel Lynn
Logistics Coordinator (PT)

Nancy Boatwright
Smart Growth Consultant (PT)

Kim Caldwell
Development Consultant (PT)

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Carl Richards, Chair

KeShaun Pearson, Vice Chair

John Basek, Treasurer

Liz Gilliland, Secretary

LaTricea D. Adams

Walter Battle

Deborah Carington

Milton Howery III

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Margot McNeeley

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