

Creating Bill Dance's 'Signature' fishing destinations starts upstream

A \$15 million investment will hopefully better support diverse fish populations and increase access for anglers



Your Turn

George Nolan
Guest columnist

I love to fish. I've loved it ever since I was a boy. At age 9, I caught my first big bass from a neighbor's farm pond in Bon Aqua (which means "good water" in French), Tennessee. It was at that age that I became obsessed with watching fishing shows on TV, particularly shows by Tennessee fishing legend Bill Dance.

Eventually, my early love for fishing and Tennessee's great outdoors led me to my dream job — working as a lawyer for the Southern Environmental Law Center, where I use my legal skillset to help protect Tennessee's beautiful waterways. That's why I was so pleased to hear that my childhood fishing hero, Bill Dance, is partnering with the state leaders to create the Bill Dance Signature Lakes initiative. Through that initiative, the state plans to spend \$15 mil-

lion improving 18 Tennessee lakes, which will be designated as "Bill Dance Signature Lakes." The money will be used to stock lakes, manage fisheries, build amenities like boat docks and ramps, and market our Volunteer State as a worldwide destination for eager anglers. Those investments, which are slated to begin this year, will hopefully better support Tennessee's diverse fish populations and increase access for local and visiting anglers alike.

The benefits of the initiative will have a broader ripple effect. Tennessee's fishing industry has a \$1.2 billion annual impact, and enhancing that revenue stream will be especially important for communities in rural counties.

But before we get too excited about this new initiative, we need to remember a simple law of nature: you can't enjoy good fishing without clean water. Spending millions of dollars on savvy marketing and new boat docks will all be for naught if our state leaders, agencies and other decisionmakers don't protect the rivers and streams that eventually empty into our lakes.

Unfortunately, the trends aren't encouraging. In 2010, state environmental officials reported that 32% of tested Tennessee river miles were "impaired," meaning they were too polluted to support some of their basic functions — including, in many cases, fishing. In 2020, that number jumped by 20 percentage points when state testing data

revealed that 55% — more than half — of river miles sampled are impaired.

Without protective action at the state level, those trends spell problems for marketing campaigns like the Bill Dance Signature Lakes Initiative. Pollution flows downstream, and some of the most common pollutants are sediment, which degrades water quality and fish populations, and mercury, which, at high levels, makes fish unsafe to eat.

If our governor and legislature want good fishing in Tennessee, comprehensive water protection is the linchpin. State regulators should protect our wetlands from overdevelopment in order to reduce flooding and filter pollution from stormwater, and should also encourage our farmers to leave buffers along our streams and rivers in order to keep topsoil in our fields and out of our waterways. In order to continue to catch big fish, we must protect our waterways from the impacts of sewer systems, mines, construction sites, erosion and industrial waste.

When Bill Dance — and the thousands of anglers who look up to him — drop their lines in Tennessee waters, we want them to find a thriving sport fishery. The best way to make sure that happens is by protecting our upstream waters.

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