

MINUTES
**CONSERVATION AND NATURAL
RESOURCES ADVISORY
COUNCIL (CNRAC)**
May 27, 2020

MEMBERS PRESENT

Rocco Ali, Member
Sara Hall-Bagdonas, Member
Silas Chamberlin, Member
Greg Goldman, Member
Meredith Graham, Member
Stock Illoway, Member
Dean Jackson, Member
Joanne Kilgour, Member
Bob Kirchner, Member
Gary Kribbs, Member
Geraldyn Singer, Secretary
Steve Stroman, Member
Janet Sweeney, First Vice Chairman
Ted Tharan, Member
Dave Trimpey, Member

DCNR

Cindy Dunn, DCNR Secretary
Gretchen Leslie, CNRAC Advisor

ADMINISTRATOR

Katrina Harris, CNRAC Administrator

GUESTS PRESENT

John Norbeck, DCNR (Presenter)
Nicole Faraguna, DCNR (Presenter)
Aara Vinsh, DCNR
Eric Nelson, DCNR
Shea Zwerver, DCNR
Ellen Shultzabarger, DCNR
Chris Novak, DCNR
Sherri Anderson, DCNR
Stacie Amsler, DCNR
Ryan Madara, OA OIT
Cindy Thomas, DCNR
Darek Jagiela, DEP
Cliff David, Conservation Economics
Sarah Corcoran, Sierra Club
Jim Laird, DCNR Trails Advisory Committee Member
Nick Troutman, Office of Senator Gene Yaw
Lisa McManus, Pennsylvania General Energy Co.
Heather Empfield, Campbell Oil & Gas

Tom Batrone, AKRF Consulting
Deborah Woodard, Pennsylvania Habitat Connectivity
John Confer, California University of PA

WELCOME

Gretchen Leslie opened the meeting and welcomed everyone. She stated the meeting is being recorded, and by participating, consent is being given to the recording and retention of the session recording.

Ms. Leslie noted Council members have the ability to ask questions and have discussion with DCNR staff who are presenting; audience guests are muted. She noted there is an opportunity for public participation towards the end of the meeting. Ms. Leslie read the names of the Council members present, along with the Council Administrator who is capturing the meeting for purposes of preparing minutes.

Ms. Leslie advised the next meeting will be July 22 and most likely will be a virtual meeting again but could be in-person if conditions allow.

Secretary GERALYN SINGER welcomed members and guests. She also welcomed and introduced four new CNRAC members and invited each to give a brief introduction of themselves.

Steve Stroman stated he lives in the Lancaster area and has been a lifelong and avid user of Pennsylvania public lands including trails. Mr. Stroman noted he is a conservation/environmental policy consultant and a member of several associations.

Silas Chamberlin said he lives in York County and is the Vice President of Economic Development for the York County Economic Alliance. Mr. Chamberlin advised he has previously worked as Executive Director of the Schuylkill River National Heritage Area as well as a Regional Advisor to DCNR. He added that he is also the author of a book on the history of hiking and has a deep interest in public lands, trails and conservation.

Dean Jackson stated he is the owner of Mt-Glen Farms in Bradford County. He said while he manages a dairy operation, conservation is his first love and he is grateful for our country's natural resources. Mr. Jackson expressed appreciation for having been a recent recipient of the Leopold Conservation Award.

Ted Tharan advised he serves as a Clarion County Commissioner where his family has resided since the 1800s. He noted Clarion County is home to the Cook Forest State Park, a National Natural Landmark. He stated his background is in the oil and gas industry in Northwest Pennsylvania, as well as the construction industry.

Ms. Singer welcomed the new members and expressed appreciation for the great variety of backgrounds of Council members that will serve the Commonwealth well.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Council unanimously approved the January 22, 2020 minutes.

COUNCIL REPORT

Geralyn Singer, CNRAC Secretary

Secretary Singer stated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council's March meeting had been cancelled. She thanked DCNR and IT staff who assisted with arranging this virtual meeting.

Secretary Singer acknowledged the work of four Council members whose terms have recently ended and thanked them for their time, knowledge and skills: Cliff David, with 20 years of service to the Council; Bill Forrey, with 14 years of service to the Council; Rick Sayles, with nearly 10 years of service to the Council; and, Ephraim Zimmerman, with 6 years of service to the Council.

SECRETARY'S REPORT

Cindy Dunn, DCNR Secretary

Secretary Dunn highlighted the following topics:

- **Council Membership:** Secretary Dunn recognized the service of the four members whose terms recently ended as mentioned by Secretary Singer. She also welcomed four new Council members and briefly discussed their backgrounds and past interactions with DCNR and conservation.
- **Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on DCNR:** Secretary Dunn stated ambitious plans for 2020 had been discussed at the January Council meeting, not knowing what was just ahead. She noted some events and conferences have had to be cancelled or changed to virtual events, including many Earth Day 50th anniversary events. She said the riparian buffer conference was cancelled, but the contract buffer planting work was able to continue. She noted the pandemic has resulted in a significant increase in outdoor recreation and park visits, which are expected to continue. Secretary Dunn referenced a similar increase which occurred during the 2008 recession (more than 40 million visitors), including a significant increase in the number of staycations due to economic conditions. She noted DCNR has been working hard to provide the best public service during the pandemic while keeping people safe and following recommended practices. She said there is a daily COVID call every morning with senior staff where practices are fine-tuned based on the latest information. Secretary Dunn advised adaptive management is being used to look at the data, adjust assumptions, and make decisions in a dynamic manner, such as starting to re-open park facilities and bringing back additional staff. She stated there is also communication with peer groups across the nation to share and learn from other states. Secretary Dunn noted the majority of DCNR office staff are working at home and meeting remotely and will be for some time.
- **DCNR 2020/2021 Budget:** Secretary Dunn advised the budget process is underway and moving forward rapidly. She said it appears DCNR will be able to operate and meet their public service mandate given the operating budget's anticipated reductions; however, the aging infrastructure in parks and forests will continue to present a funding challenge for DCNR.

In response to a question from Rocco Ali about the availability of money from the Keystone Fund to DCNR in the next fiscal year, Secretary Dunn stated only the operating funds have been discussed so far, not special funds. She said she will keep Council informed.

DCNR ADVISOR REPORT
Gretchen Leslie, CNRAC Advisor

Gretchen Leslie advised the latest round of grants through DCNR's Community Conservation Partnership Program closed on April 22, with 424 applications submitted requesting \$103 million with matches of \$147 million. She noted the number of applications submitted in the midst of the pandemic is one of the highest in DCNR's grant history and reinforces the great need for investment in local communities and parks. She added the \$251 million total project costs are a significant investment into Pennsylvania communities.

Ms. Leslie stated the final draft of the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan has been released for a 30-day public review period, with comments due by June 25. She noted the Governor's Office and National Park Service have signed off on the final draft. Ms. Leslie noted the Council had provided comments on the draft plan, and comments on the final draft are also welcome.

Ms. Leslie advised DCNR partnered with the Pennsylvania Department of Health's Young Lungs at Play Program and has now banned tobacco use, vaping and e-cigarettes within 30 feet of any state playground facility which impacts 135 locations in state parks.

Ms. Leslie stated July 1st is the 25th anniversary of DCNR's formation, as well as CNRAC. She said she will keep CNRAC involved in discussions about recognizing these anniversaries.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE
Eric Nelson, Director of Legislative Affairs, DCNR

Eric Nelson advised that House Bill 2387, the budget bill, passed the House the previous day, and provides funding for the first five months of fiscal year 2020/2021. He advised the Senate received the bill yesterday, and it appears the bill is on track to be finalized this week. Mr. Nelson stated House Bill 2004, which would repeal the Keystone Fund Act and annual appropriations into that Fund, has been removed from the calendar, and it appears to be stalled for now. He stated another Bill he is watching is House Bill 1822, which would place a temporary restriction on the Commonwealth's entering into contracts which require the expenditure of money from special funds and would expire once the emergency is rescinded; he said he did not have any other news regarding this bill which seems to be stalled.

Secretary Singer asked if House Bill 2004 stalled due to the number of people now beginning to react and oppose the bill, and if CNRAC members should continue communication with legislators regarding that issue. Mr. Nelson responded that communication with legislators will continue to be important. He said it is possible legislators will be returning home once the budget is passed for the summer and returning in August or September, but those plans could change.

PRESENTATIONS

Nicole Faraguna, DCNR Policy Director Proposed Revised DCNR ATV Policy

Nicole Faraguna advised the draft revised ATV policy was issued for public comment with proposed changes to the current policy, which has been in place since September 2015. She summarized the proposed changes noting the policy would rescind the ATV trail development moratorium that has been in place since 2003; would authorize DCNR to consider new ATV trails and connectors on state forest lands and continue to explore opportunities for funding ATV parks and facilities on private lands or public lands acquired specifically for motorized recreation; would allow the DCNR Secretary to designate portions of public use forest roads as temporary, seasonal or permanent ATV trails if deemed necessary; and would allow DCNR to work with stakeholders to establish trails on privately held lands with written agreements or easements that provide permission for public access. Ms. Faraguna said the policy will continue to prohibit ATV riding within state park boundaries. She added there may be situations where the Bureau of Forestry may request public comments on proposed projects or activities that have broader impact on a community or region.

Ms. Faraguna stated the proposed revised draft policy was released on January 27 and a 60-day comment period was provided through March 27. She explained the proposed draft revised policy was circulated through DCNR's web site and social media and was explained through online webinars and meetings, such as CNRAC's January 2020 meeting. She noted DCNR received 857 official comments, with the vast majority received by email. She stated most comments did not reference specific policy language but stated their support or opposition to the proposed changes. Ms. Faraguna said approximately 75% of the comments were supportive of the changes, with 25% indicating some concerns or overall opposition. Ms. Faraguna said DCNR will be balancing the public comments with other survey and polling data more representative of all of Pennsylvania. She advised many organizations and association provided input, as well as some elected officials. She expressed appreciation for CNRAC's thoughtful comments.

Ms. Faraguna advised the next steps include preparing a response to comments document by the late summer, adapting the policy as needed, and having a final policy in early to mid-fall.

Rocco Ali asked if any consideration is being given to how to support trail maintenance and enforcement, such as requiring an increase in registration fees for the public, or any other thoughts as to funding sources. Ms. Faraguna stated a number of comments expressed concern about DCNR's enforcement capacity to address illegal riding and funding to plan, construct and maintain an ATV trail system versus a hiking trail. She said DCNR recognizes and understands, especially in light of the pandemic, that the budget will be a challenge. She noted 25 new ranger positions were in the Governor's proposed budget released in February and would have been helpful in alleviating the enforcement challenges; the funding issues still need serious consideration and will be incorporated into the planning process as DCNR moves forward.

DCNR's Operations of State Parks and Forests During the Pandemic

John Norbeck, DCNR Deputy Secretary for Parks and Forestry

John Norbeck stated the last few months have been challenging with the COVID-19 pandemic, with all areas being looked at from the administrative side, to timber management, the gas industry, public communications, and education programs. He advised DCNR has been having virtual senior staff meetings every day (seven days a week early on in the pandemic) to ensure all divisions are moving in the right direction and developing appropriate flexible processes. Mr. Norbeck discussed several specific focus areas including timber management and sales, noting there are 14,000 to 15,000 acres of timber sales annually. He stated the timber industry was struck hard by the pandemic, with timber products going to China negatively affected by trade deals over the last few years and now by the pandemic. He stated during the Great Recession DCNR continued to keep wood products moving through the industry and kept a number of companies viable, so DCNR had to figure out a way to do that again and a process was quickly put in place. Mr. Norbeck advised DCNR also worked with the gas industry so there has been limited disruption. Mr. Norbeck stated four critical infrastructure projects were able to proceed, and DCNR has been working with contractors to get projects designed since this work can be done while staff and contractors are working at home; this also allowed projects to proceed once construction began again.

Mr. Norbeck reviewed the status of parks, noting there had been evolving changes to respond to conditions but always prioritizing the need to provide outdoor recreation as an essential part of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. He advised citizens have been responding, and Pennsylvania state parks experienced record visitation numbers in March—an increase of 29% or 500,000 new visits over March 2019. Mr. Norbeck said 17 parks experienced 100% increase in visits, and a number experienced a 50% increase. He noted April visits were up about 14%; he explained that while visits were very high, April is typically high when as campgrounds and cabins open but there were no overnight accommodations open in April 2020. Mr. Norbeck said there were many returning users, as well as first-time visitors which also brought challenges; as other nearby states closed parks, many of those citizens came to Pennsylvania state parks. Mr. Norbeck noted DCNR saw a significant amount of illegal ATV use, an increase in graffiti (primarily in the southeastern part of the state), and significant trash issues from increased visitors combined with reduced maintenance staff. Mr. Norbeck said a number of special patrols were put in place to make rangers more noticeable and educate visitors about ATV use.

Mr. Norbeck discussed the use of a number of communication tools to help educate the public on the types of services available in state parks and forests and on the changes in place during the pandemic. He noted social media was used successfully as well as press releases and media interviews every week by Secretary Dunn and himself. Mr. Norbeck recognized the fantastic work done by DCNR's communication staff during the pandemic to develop appropriate messaging, with several million hits at times on social media postings. He added these postings generated a number of offers by volunteers to assist with cleaning up the parks when the parks are fully open.

Mr. Norbeck advised DCNR has been coordinating with sister agencies, the Governor's Office, other states, and Federal facilities. He said initially there were daily conversations to know what each agency was doing and ensure coordination where possible; conversations are now weekly. He noted coordination and planning with the Fish and Boat Commission was important to balance the opening day visits with staggered soft openings. He stated there had been some

limited negative social media posts, but many of the posts used photos from previous years.

Mr. Norbeck displayed a sample of the map that was continually updated to show the status of state parks.

Mr. Norbeck reviewed the re-opening process and noted the four components of the planning are employee health and safety, public health and safety, protection of resources, and providing for public recreation and enjoyment. He stated a plan incorporating CDC guidance was submitted to the Governor's Office on April 28 and was approved April 29. He explained the plan has a phased approach to re-opening various facilities including restrooms, marinas, beaches, pools, and overnight accommodations. He noted the pandemic has had an impact on lifeguard certifications as Red Cross and other organizations are not currently doing certifications so this has presented a staffing issue. He said it is possible pool users may be reduced by 50%. He advised social distancing restrictions will be in place at beaches also. He advised large events have been cancelled at least through June 15, and reservations are not being taken for any additional large events for the rest of summer.

Mr. Norbeck noted the largest challenge is bringing staff back on, as well as training them on new safety protocols, including cleaning and social distancing, creative scheduling, and use of equipment and vehicles.

Mr. Norbeck said DCNR is also continuing education about social distancing which has been effective in many of the parks and forests.

Mr. Norbeck stated DCNR is looking forward to brighter days ahead. He stated the Memorial Day weekend was a busy time across the Commonwealth, with just the normal type of incidents.

Mr. Norbeck summarized information received from Pennsylvania's tourism staff who have conducted surveys which indicate a high expectation for staycations and potential significant increase in park visits to 4 to 5 million.

Silas Chamberlin asked if the maintenance backlog and the timing of bringing staff back would have any impact on the re-opening of facilities. Mr. Norbeck advised that staff have been able to be brought back as needed, and the Governor's Office and Office of Budget have been very responsive to staffing requests. Mr. Norbeck said the challenge right now is related to re-opening pools, and DCNR is working with DEP to ensure labs will be staffed up to do water testing at pools and swimming beaches.

WORK GROUP REPORTS

Bob Kirchner, Motorized Recreation Work Group Chair

Bob Kirchner said the Motorized Work Group has not had a recent call; however, he did have an opportunity in April to talk with Troy Withers who has assumed responsibility for motorized recreation within DCNR. Mr. Kirchner said the work group was presented with an opportunity to have an article about CNRAC and the work group's motorized recreation recommendations in the magazine Sharetrails, a publication of the Blue Ribbon Coalition based in Idaho. He said the article should be published in mid-June. Mr. Kirchner said the work group is awaiting the document mentioned by Ms. Faraguna compiling the comments and responses on the proposed

revised ATV policy to see how they relate to the Work Group's recommendations.

Geralyn Singer, Infrastructure Work Group Co-Chair
Stock Illoway, Infrastructure Work Group Co-Chair

Secretary Singer advised the Work Group's priorities are awareness, legislation and funding. Secretary Singer said there is a great need to fund infrastructure at state parks and forests. She noted there are many partners who are helping with this need, including the Pennsylvania Parks and Forest Foundation who the Work Group met with a few months ago. Secretary Singer said the Work Group will be discussing on their next call whether there is a need for a letter from CNRAC addressing House Bill 2004; she invited Council members to email herself, Gretchen or Katrina if they had any thoughts. She said the Work Group would also be looking at the potential for field trips to see in person the infrastructure needs, as well as invite local stakeholders to interact with Council. She added another focus is to keep everyone up to date on funding issues. Secretary Singer said the Work Group will be sending out a document that identifies some resources for getting up to speed on the issue or reading more about the issue. She noted the increase in visits to parks and forests adds to the importance of maintaining the infrastructure.

Secretary Singer noted this week is parks and forests week, and the Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation has a variety of information and resources available through their social media outlets highlighting our parks and forests, as well as highlighting the infrastructure needs.

Rocco Ali asked how urgent are infrastructure repairs to any of the high hazard dams and if there are any plans to alleviate. Mr. Norbeck responded that DCNR pays greater attention to high hazard dams than just about any other infrastructure, and all high hazard dams are inspected annually. He said some are structurally deficit, but do not pose any immediate danger such as a collapse. He said as Keystone Fund money or other funding becomes available, repairs to high hazard dams are prioritized. He noted Keystone Fund money is also set aside every year for emergency repairs to dams.

Mr. Ali noted the Governor's Office had released to the Fish and Boat Commission a considerable amount of money for high hazard dams which allowed for design work on new dams, as well as design work for repairs. He asked if there was any possibility of DCNR pursuing such funding. Mr. Norbeck responded that he believed the Fish and Boat Commission received a \$25 million allotment, and he has been in touch with the Commission to discuss common issues. Mr. Norbeck said DCNR has not been in touch with the Governor's Office yet as he wanted to discuss first with the Fish and Boat Commission.

Meredith Graham, Strategic Planning Work Group Chair

Meredith Graham advised recent Strategic Planning Work Group activities have included preparing comments on the Outdoor Recreation strategic plan previously discussed by Ms. Leslie. She noted the Work Group had also prepared comments on the Penn's Parks for All strategic plan, and the Council was anticipating an updated report this summer although the timing may have been impacted by the pandemic. Ms. Leslie said she had not checked lately on the status of the plan but suspects there may be some delay. Ms. Graham stated the Work Group had also prepared comments on a draft of the priorities being considered for the Bureau of Forestry's strategic plan, and a draft plan is expected in late 2020 or early 2021.

Public Comments

Secretary Singer noted no requests for time to present public comments had been received by the previous day's deadline. She invited anyone interested to visit the CNRAC website after the meeting and submit comments on the form available there by the end of this week to have them included as part of the meeting minutes.

Mr. Jim Laird submitted the following questions:

- Will the overwhelming number of out of state OHV riders influence the State's sense of urgency to build new trails and new riding accommodations?
- Where is the OHV chapter in the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan?

OTHER BUSINESS

Secretary Singer asked for any other business topics, and none were offered.

MEETING ADJOURNED

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting at 11:44 a.m.

Notice of the May meeting was published in a newspaper of general circulation in Dauphin County and mailed to individuals and offices in compliance with the Sunshine Act (1986-84). These minutes constitute the official record of the Conservation and Natural Resources Advisory Council; no official transcript is provided.