

**Pennsylvania State Game Lands, State Forests, and
State Parks Habitat Conservation Plan for Indiana (*Myotis sodalis*) and Northern Long-Eared
(*Myotis septentrionalis*) Bats (also known as the PA State Lands HCP)**

Updated May 4, 2021

The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) and the Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC) manage a combined 3.8 million acres of mostly forested public lands for many uses and values, including wildlife habitat. Forest management strategies and uses for these lands include removing timber and prescribed burns, both of which have the potential to impact bats using foraging, roosting, maternity colony, spring staging, fall swarming and migratory habitat in Pennsylvania, including the federally endangered Indiana bat (*Myotis sodalis*) and the federally threatened northern long-eared bat (*Myotis septentrionalis*). However, timber removal and prescribed burns also help create foraging habitat and can be beneficial to Indiana and northern long-eared bats.

To avoid these impacts to the greatest extent possible and mitigate them where they might occur, the agencies applied for and were issued an Incidental Take Permit (ITP) by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on December 23, 2020. A requirement of the ITP is the implementation of a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for the species for which take coverage is being permitted. The HCP allows the PGC and DCNR to limit and address impacts across the entire 3.8 million acres over a 30-year period, rather than on a project-by-project basis. This allows both agencies to be more proactive in planning for the conservation of Indiana and northern long-eared bats across the state lands system. Initiatives such as seasonal restrictions, canopy retention, and hibernation protection will be incorporated into the plan to aid in the conservation of Indiana and northern long-eared bats.

What is the goal of the habitat conservation plan (HCP)?

The overall goal of this HCP is to develop and implement a conservation plan that will accomplish the following objectives:

- Avoid and minimize incidental take of Indiana and northern long-eared bats resulting from forestry management and other related activities and to fully offset impacts to covered bats on state lands;
- Accommodate current and future forestry management activities on state lands;
- Support state conservation goals such as those described in the Game and Wildlife Code, the Conservation and Natural Resources Act, the Wild Resource Conservation Act, the Cave Protection Act, the Environmental Rights Amendment to the PA Constitution, and other applicable state laws and regulations; and
- Identify targeted conservation efforts that can improve the value of state lands for Indiana bats and northern long-eared bats and thus help stabilize and aid in the recovery of the species.

What forestry management activities are covered under the HCP?

This HCP addresses the agencies' forest management activities that are critical to managing a diverse and sustainable habitat on state lands but have the potential to incidentally take Indiana or northern long-eared bats. Activities occurring on state lands that are not listed below are subject to their own permitting requirements. The HCP covered activities are as follows:

- *Forestry Regeneration and Operations:* timber harvests, timber salvage, fencing and firewood collection
- *Roads and Trails:* roads associated with timber harvests, trails, and maintenance/use associated with roads and trails
- *Prescribed Fire:* burning and fire breaks

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- *Activities associated with the HCP implementation:* habitat restoration and HCP monitoring efforts

Why are energy exploration and development on state lands not covered under the HCP?

Natural gas, oil, and coal deposits are found beneath most state lands, and the extraction of these resources has the potential to impact Indiana and northern long-eared bats. All such energy extraction efforts are subject to their own compliance processes and are not covered by this HCP, which focuses solely on the forestry and forestry-related activities as described above.

What steps were required for PGC and DCNR to complete the HCP process and to receive the ITP? And was there any public input used in developing the HCP?

In order to obtain an ITP, the PGC and DCNR drafted an HCP that was then reviewed and approved by the USFWS. The HCP was developed using input from a stakeholder group comprised of experts and professionals in the timber, prescribed fire, and wildlife fields. Groups that were invited to participate were ones that could provide direct input on the covered activities in the HCP. The participants represent conservation organizations, academic institutions, and business and development interests related specifically to forest management activities and/or Indiana or northern long-eared bat biology and were selected to provide input on timber, prescribed fire, and wildlife management on state lands. The HCP was submitted to the USFWS as part of the ITP permit application.

The issuance of an ITP is a federal action by the USFWS. Certain federal actions, such as the issuance of the ITP, require compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, 42 U.S.C. § 4332 et seq. (NEPA). The objectives of NEPA include disclosing environmental information, fostering intergovernmental coordination and cooperation, and enhancing public participation in government planning and decision making. The NEPA environmental document (Environmental Assessment) assessed and analyzed the potential effects of the action on the human and natural environments, including biological resources and economic and social resources. Upon completion of the preliminary NEPA analysis, the Draft Environmental Assessment and HCP was published in the *Federal Register* on July 22, 2020 with a 30-day public comment period which ended on August 21, 2020 (docket number FWS-R5-ES-2013-0090). Once the public comment period closed, the Environmental Assessment was finalized (including responding to any public comments received). USFWS made the determination to issue an incidental take permit to the PGC and DNCR on December 23, 2020. The final HCP and EA documents can be accessed at via the following website link: https://ecos.fws.gov/ecp0/conservationPlan/plan?plan_id=4434.

What has occurred since permit issuance?

PGC and DCNR have been implementing the HCP as written, which involved initially training staff on the HCP and how and when the various avoidance, minimization and mitigation measures are to be implemented. Incorporating the various avoidance and minimization measures into the existing forestry management activities is ongoing, as well is the continued monitoring of the covered bat species. A component of the ITP is that an annual report will be submitted to the USFWS. The annual report, or a link to it, will be provided to the public once available.

Please direct any questions or comments you may have regarding the PA Forestry HCP to Forestry_HCP@pa.gov.