

Transition Statement to the Governor Regarding the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

Submitted by the
Conservation and Natural Resources Advisory Council



Adopted November 2022

The Role of CNRAC

The Conservation and Natural Resources Advisory Council (CNRAC) is a bipartisan, legislatively-mandated advisory council supporting the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). CNRAC was created by the same legislation that created DCNR in 1995. The CNRAC mission statement is:

Drawing upon the diversity of experiences and perspectives of its appointed citizen members, the council will provide to DCNR, to the Governor, to the General Assembly, and to the public, advice regarding the conservation and stewardship of the commonwealth's natural resources.

CNRAC conducts bi-monthly public meetings and undertakes various measures to assist the agency. Council members include professionals who are knowledgeable in fields related to the work of DCNR. Through its workgroup structure, CNRAC studies issues affecting DCNR, solicits public input and provides informed advice. CNRAC reports annually to the Governor and to the General Assembly concerning its activities.

CNRAC membership consists of the Secretary of DCNR and 18 citizen members who are appointed by the Governor and both houses of the General Assembly. The term of office of each appointed member is three years. Unfortunately, CNRAC currently operates at less than full complement because requests for appointment/reappointment are still pending.

Additional information, including CNRAC statements and reports, a list of current CNRAC members, and an opportunity to submit public comment or subscribe to CNRAC's e-newsletter, may be found at: <https://www.dcnr.pa.gov/CNRAC/Pages/default.aspx>. The CNRAC e-newsletter currently reaches more than 450 recipients, including key stakeholders in the conservation and outdoor recreation communities who represent thousands of Pennsylvanians.

Identifying Priorities for the Next Administration

We believe DCNR made significant investments and achieved strategic accomplishments in the past eight years. The recent COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the essential nature of DCNR's work and forced the agency to overcome many challenges. It is our hope that the next administration will build on that progress. Accordingly, CNRAC identifies the following five priority issues and offers corresponding recommendations for your consideration.

- 1. Continue funding infrastructure improvements in state parks and forests**
- 2. Capitalize on outdoor recreation momentum**
- 3. Protect natural resources and address sustainability concerns**
- 4. Contribute to the Commonwealth and local economies**
- 5. Expand opportunities for all Pennsylvanians**

Priority Issue #1 – Continue Funding Infrastructure Improvements in State Parks and Forests

DCNR observed an unprecedented level of public visitation to state parks and forests during the COVID-19 pandemic, and DCNR expects this growth to continue as many people have a new or renewed interest in outdoor recreation. The rapid increase in users associated with the pandemic highlighted the weakness in infrastructure funding. The pandemic challenged DCNR to do more with its limited resources because outdoor recreation has become an essential part of Pennsylvania life. State parks and forests have a documented \$1.4 billion backlog of needed infrastructure work. Infrastructure needs include but are not limited to failing structures, dams, water and sewage systems. These present public safety concerns that will likely result in shutdowns of DCNR facilities at a time when they are most needed by the public. Although the FY22-23 state budget included a substantial bipartisan investment in conservation, including \$75 million to address DCNR infrastructure needs, it was effectively a modest one-time “down payment” toward addressing a much larger infrastructure problem.

Recommendations for the Next Administration:

- Identify and develop a long-term dedicated funding source to provide substantial annual investment in the repair, maintenance, and growth of DCNR facilities.
- Secure funding to meet the basic needs of DCNR facilities and to achieve compliance with health and safety standards at a minimum.
- Also secure funding to create amenities that are attractive to visitors.
- Protect existing special funds (such as the “Keystone Recreation, Park & Conservation Fund,” among others) to use dedicated revenues consistent with the fund’s original purpose, rather than diverting revenues elsewhere.
- Continue to manage public land natural resources in a manner that is both environmentally responsible and which reinvests in infrastructure.
- Refer to DCNR’s ready list of infrastructure improvement projects.

Priority Issue #2 - Capitalize on Outdoor Recreation Momentum

The tremendous growth in outdoor recreation spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic presents a historic opportunity for natural resource managers, community leaders and business owners. Public lands like those managed by DCNR and the local governments and recreation/conservation organizations that benefit from DCNR’s many grant programs are at the heart of outdoor recreation. Now is the time to make investments that will attract and retain users, conserve the Commonwealth’s incredible natural resources and stimulate local and regional economic growth. Pennsylvania already boasts the sixth largest outdoor recreation economy in the nation, generating billions of dollars in economic impact each year and supporting thousands of full-time jobs. Outdoor recreation is now widely recognized as critical for physical and mental health. Recreation activities are diversifying and increasingly

fueled by technology. Users want a variety of activities that are close to home. DCNR is working strategically to keep the momentum going.

Recommendations for the Next Administration:

- Support DCNR’s new Director of Outdoor Recreation (a position established in 2022) and the development of a new Office of Outdoor Recreation to fully realize the benefits of outdoor recreation to Pennsylvania’s economy and quality of life.
- Leverage DCNR grant programs to protect and expand trail access and close major trail gaps.
- Meet the recreation needs of new and diverse public lands users.
- Maintain a strong commitment to the shared use of public land resources.
- Expand outdoor recreation opportunities in response to increased public demand, such as in the area of motorized recreation.
- Implement existing DCNR strategic plans relating to outdoor recreation, namely the [Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan](#), [Penn’s Parks for All—A Plan for Pennsylvania’s State Parks of Tomorrow](#), and the [Pennsylvania Land and Water Trail Network Strategic Plan](#), which were developed with extensive public input.

Priority Issue #3 - Protect Natural Resources and Address Sustainability Concerns

The DCNR mission is: “to conserve and sustain Pennsylvania’s natural resources for present and future generations’ use and enjoyment.” The agency is further guided by strategic initiatives that focus its work on specific topics such as water, climate change, and green infrastructure and sustainability, among others. DCNR accomplishes its important work through various programs affecting the Commonwealth’s natural resources. DCNR manages public lands (state parks and forests), provides technical information concerning natural resources, and offers community partnership grants and assistance to benefit the environment in locations beyond the DCNR system of parks and forests.

Recommendations for the Next Administration:

- Continue to address water quality issues, particularly through DCNR programs that plant forest buffers along streams and rivers.
- Increase tree cover in Pennsylvania communities via DCNR’s urban forestry programs and encourage sustainable management of private forest lands.
- Invest in natural climate solutions (actions in the landscape that increase carbon storage or avoid greenhouse gas emissions), in addition to innovations in clean energy and other efforts to reduce emissions.
- Engage DCNR’s Bureau of Geological Survey to explore and promote opportunities for carbon capture utilization and storage in the Commonwealth.

- Position DCNR to lead by example with respect to green and sustainable initiatives on state-owned lands.
- Implement existing DCNR strategic plans around climate change, sustainability and resiliency, and forest threats, particularly the [Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Plan](#).
- Continue to partner with conservation organizations and other public and private sector entities to enhance DCNR's commitment to biodiversity.

Priority Issue #4 - Contribute to the Commonwealth and Local Economies

The work of DCNR strengthens the Commonwealth and local economies in myriad ways. For example, our state forest lands play a key role in Pennsylvania's \$20 billion dollar forest products industry that directly employs over 60,000 people. DCNR actively manages a 2.2 million-acre state forest system, the largest single landholding in the state. These DCNR-managed lands supply a consistent yield of forest products from year to year, providing stability in this sector of Pennsylvania's economy. A consistent yield keeps sawmills and other facilities—many of which are small, family-owned businesses—operational at times when stumpage prices are low. Revenue from state forest timber receipts provide a reliable funding stream into DCNR's operating budget. (Annual revenue from state forest timber sales averaged more than \$18 million from 2018 to 2022.) Similarly, DCNR manages oil and natural gas extraction on state lands, activities which are expected to generate \$67 million in FY22-23 for the Commonwealth. DCNR supports local economic development through its various community grant programs. The state parks and forests managed by DCNR attract millions of visitors each year who spend their outdoor recreation dollars in the surrounding communities.

Recommendations for the Next Administration:

- Continue to recognize and promote Pennsylvania as a globally important supplier of forest products, including timber, through ongoing sustainable management of public lands and appropriate outreach to private landowners.
- Support workforce development in the forest products industry with measures that improve job safety and reduce worker's compensation insurance costs for forest industry workers (which can be prohibitively expensive under historic insurance models).
- Ensure the Oil and Gas Lease Fund retains its original purpose so that revenues received from oil and gas development on DCNR-managed lands are used by DCNR for conservation, recreation, dams, flood control, and land acquisition—rather than being transferred to the state General Fund.
- Use DCNR community grant programs to leverage resources through key partnerships.
- Invest in the stewardship and maintenance of state parks and forests—see Priority Issues #1 and #2 above—to deliver long-term economic return at state and local levels.

Priority Issue #5 - Expand Opportunities for All Pennsylvanians

In recent years DCNR has undertaken various initiatives that focus on people, both citizens and employees. This is especially evident in DCNR's current Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (also known as "Recreation for All") and the state parks-specific planning document called "Penn's Parks for All." These strategic plans aim to make public lands welcoming to all Pennsylvanians. Likewise, a newly established Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) office within DCNR reflects the agency's commitment to ensuring accessibility, providing inclusive and equitable services and employing a diverse workforce. The remote working conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic forced DCNR to improve its use of technology to better serve its employees and the public. For example, DCNR now uses a virtual meeting platform to communicate with employees located around the state in "all-staff" calls on a regular basis. Both DCNR and CNRAC observed higher levels of public participation in virtual programs during the pandemic. Some events such as CNRAC public meetings are now offered in a dual format, virtual and in-person, to accommodate stakeholders who otherwise might not participate. Another example of DCNR's improved use of technology is a new Bureau of Forestry online reservation system for camping activities.

Recommendations for the Next Administration:

- Reach the highest levels of diversity, equity, and inclusion in DCNR's outdoor recreation programs, services, and workforce.
- Respond to fresh perspectives from DCNR's new Next Gen Council, a citizen advisory group tasked with informing and supporting the agency's DEI initiatives.
- Identify and eliminate obstacles which currently prevent DCNR from hiring a sufficient number of qualified applicants for employment.
- Expand the highly successful Pennsylvania Outdoor Corps program which provides environmental education and job training opportunities for young people while building a talent pipeline for the DCNR workforce.
- Continue to expand DCNR's use of technology to inform and engage with citizens and employees.