

PARKS AND RECREATION

2010 Report Card for Pennsylvania's Infrastructure

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In 2009, Pennsylvania's State Parks were awarded the National Gold Medal Award for Excellence in Park and Recreation Management by the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration, recognizing the state's parks as the among the nation's best. The state owes some of the parks' success to the Growing Greener II Act, or Act 45, through which Pennsylvania invested \$625 million in agricultural and environmental resources in 2005. But further progress for parks is threatened—tax revenues are falling and the federal and state budget for parks has been reduced, including a \$12 million cut in 2003. The GGII initiative will reach its terminus in 2010, leaving another major gap in the funding needs for the continued maintenance and improvements to the state's parks and recreational facilities. In 2009, demand was expected to exceed funding by almost \$160 million a year. Looking to the future, the exhaustion of bond funds and the downturn in the economy will reduce the available revenue sources and further jeopardize the funding for the management, maintenance and improvements of the parks. Additional legislation must be proposed to meet funding needs for parks and recreation so that Pennsylvania can continue as a leader in managing and sustaining its state parks, forests and recreational areas.

BACKGROUND

Approximately 11 percent of Pennsylvania is land dedicated to parks and recreation. Pennsylvania is the home to 15 national recreational areas, six national heritage areas, 26 national natural landmarks, 117 state parks, 23 US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) recreational reservoirs, 180 county parks and numerous city and municipal parks. The Allegheny National Forest alone comprises 513,000 acres of forested land. The 117 state parks and state forested lands cover 2.1 million acres of forested land and the county parks consist of 67,000 acres of dedicated parkland. Not including the reservoir areas and parks under the jurisdiction of the USACE, the municipalities and the cities of Pennsylvania, the total park and forest area managed and preserved is 2.6 million acres.

The US Department of Agriculture Forest Service oversees the Allegheny National Forest, the USACE oversees the recreational reservoirs and dams, and DCNR is the steward of the state-maintained park and forest areas. Each of these agencies has its own policies, budgets and staff.

Pennsylvania has two coastal zone areas: 63 miles of coastline along Lake Erie and 57 miles of coastline along the Delaware Estuary. These coastal zones include residential areas, commercial areas, industrial areas and beach/recreational areas. These coastal areas are managed under the Pennsylvania's Coastal Zone Management Plan under the federal Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972.

Of the 67 counties in Pennsylvania, approximately 30 have recreational departments supported through local tax dollars, state funds and philanthropists. Through community partnership

programs, DCNR assists counties in the planning, maintenance and funding of county and local parks.

The U.S. Census Bureau lists more than 12.2 million Pennsylvania residents in 2000. In 2008, the population was projected to be nearly 12.5 million people. With a minimum total of 2.6 million acres of parkland, the projected park area per 1,000 residents is 210 acres.

More than 36 million people visit the state parks each year and more than 1.4 million visits are made to the Allegheny National Forest.

CONDITIONS

The U.S. National Park Service, USACE, DCNR and the counties are responsible for the operation and maintenance of their respective parks' dams, roads, bridges, water supplies, wastewater treatment systems, park centers and trails. These agencies also provide personnel and resources to manage, maintain and protect the natural resources, with duties that include preventing or controlling forest fires, studying, surveying and treating pests, surveying and treating invasive species, managing mineral extraction, maintaining camp sites, treating streams impacted by acid mine drainage and illegal discharges, providing outreach and educational programs and managing the use of trees for timber and maintaining a tree nursery for new growth.

State forests have more than 2,500 miles of trails used for hiking, cross-country skiing, mountain biking, horseback riding, snowmobile riding and ATV riding. Additional activities permitted in the state parks include camping, hunting, fishing, and boating. Picnic areas available at each state park are typically equipped with tables, fireplaces, potable water, and parking. Trail fees and rental fees help finance the operation and maintenance of these facilities; however, other wide-scale maintenance issues such as fire, pest and invasive species control and infrastructure upkeep require greater funding.

Recent challenges facing the forests and parks in Pennsylvania include tree biodiversity; forest age composition; poor tree regeneration due to white-tailed deer over-browsing; gypsy moth defoliating trees with outbreak populations every five to 10 years; Hemlock Woolly Adelgid damaging the Eastern Hemlock; Japanese Knotweed, mile-a-minute weed, tree-of-heaven and other non-native invasive species threatening the growth of native vegetative species; Emerald Ash Borer destroying ash trees; and Sirex Woodwasp affecting the Scots and red pine trees.^{5,15,16}

Capital Improvements

In the last three years, DCNR and county and local authorities have requested grant money from the Growing Greener II Fund for capital improvement projects. Requests have been made for farmland acquisition, park improvements, landslide restoration, stream restoration, storm/sanitary sewer separation and city revitalization and redevelopment. Of the 67 Pennsylvania counties, 54 counties submitted requests to improve or enhance cultural and natural resources. Forty-seven of the 54 counties requested funds specifically to improve parks. Requests were awarded to park projects in the 30 of the 47 counties. Through the Growing Green I and II funds and the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), approximately 48 percent of requests were awarded. This percentage is expected to decrease to 20 percent after the Growing Greener funds are exhausted. Examples of recent capital projects include

\$4.4 million improvements to Point State Park in Pittsburgh and completion of the Great Allegheny Passage, a 150-mile hiking and biking trail between Pittsburgh and Cumberland, Md.

Economics

Pennsylvania's state forests contain some of the world's most valuable timber. The sale of timber products from state forests returns money to the commonwealth and provides a stable resource base for the forest products industry—66% of the budget of the parks comes from timber sales. The timber cut from Pennsylvania's state forests can be marketed with a "green label," which means the wood has been cut from a forest that is managed in an environmentally sensitive manner. The sale of this timber helps to support the state's forests; for example, just for the Allegheny National Forest, between 1987 and 2005 gross receipts from Allegheny timber-harvesting operations totaled just over \$330 million. But timber sales have been lower than projected recently, meaning this source of parks funding has left a gap in the budget.

User fees are assessed for snowmobile, ATV and cross-country skiing uses. These fees generate \$3.5 million per year of revenue to maintain the trails and other recreational services.

Land is leased for gas and oil well development, with an 18 percent royalty generating revenue. The money generated from oil and gas lease sales, rents and royalties goes to the Oil and Gas Lease Fund. In the past, lease sale funds have been used for projects such as land and mineral rights acquisition, infrastructure and trail improvements, habitat protection and restoration, and recreation equipment. Currently there is considerable debate on how much of state forest lands should be opened to Marcellus Shale gas harvesting operations, since the construction of the infrastructure required to harvest the gas and get it to market would considerably impact the environment of the parks, as well as beyond. But Marcellus Shale production could also benefit the parks in terms of funding. According to acting DCNR secretary John Quigley, royalties to be earned from just the leases already signed by DCNR project revenues could increase from an estimated \$6 million in FY 2010-11 to over \$300 million annually over the next 15 to 20 years.

POLICY OPTIONS

A variety of funding sources provide support for Pennsylvania's green spaces. National parks and monuments are funded by the federal budget. State parks are funded by state taxation, federal funds, special funds, generated revenue and donations. County and local parks are funded by county and local taxes, state grant money, generated revenue and donations.

Federal Funds

Since 1964, the federal LCWF has provided \$160 million in funding for more than 1,500 projects in Pennsylvania. However, in recent years, those federal funds have been greatly reduced. With federal budget cuts continuing, Pennsylvania's national, state and local lands, parks, and recreational, cultural and historical sites are accumulating a significant backlog of funding needs.

State Funds

Spending on parks and recreation in Pennsylvania's state budget 2006-07 was \$104.5 million and the budget for the following year was \$116 million. The money available for the budget for 2008-09 jumped to \$120 million and was reduced to a projected budget of \$113.7 million in 2009-10.

The overall budget for DCNR has increased from 2006 to 2009. However, recent downturns in the economy will result in projected reduced revenues.

Through the Growing Greener II Fund, Pennsylvania provided \$217.5 million to be distributed over five years to preserve natural areas and open spaces, improve state parks and enhance local recreational needs. As part of the fund, DCNR managed the County Environmental Initiative Program where up to \$90 million of the \$217.5 million was allotted to the state's 67 counties to help address local priorities. In addition, the fund provided \$27.5 million to the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission to repair fish hatcheries and aging dams and \$20 million to the Pennsylvania Game Commission for habitat-related facility upgrades and repairs.

While state parks have received significant capital funds for badly needed upgrades and improvements from Keystone and Growing Greener Programs, **state parks operating funds have already been cut significantly** going back to the \$12 million reduction in 2003. In the interim between then and now, the Bureau of State Parks has taken all measures possible short of closing parks to maintain operations. This has included the use of the augmentation funds previously earmarked for major maintenance to go to normal operations.

State forests have traditionally funded 66% of their budget through timber sales. The GGII initiative will reach its terminus in 2010, leaving a major gap in the funding needs for the continued maintenance and improvements to the state's parks and recreational facilities. In 2009, demand was expected to exceed funding by almost \$160 million a year. Looking to the future, the exhaustion of bond funds and the downturn in the economy will reduce the available revenue sources and jeopardize the funding for the management, maintenance and improvements of the parks in Pennsylvania.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Pennsylvania sections of ASCE recommend the following measures be taken for the state's Parks and Recreation infrastructure. First, the state needs to approve a budget that covers the needs of the parks prior to distributing these funds to other line items in the general budget. Also, renewing Growing Greener would establish a funding stream that would allow Pennsylvania to maintain its parks to the current quality level. Funding should also be allotted to the implementation of programs to prevent the spread of invasive pests and vegetation that may destroy certain species of trees and prevent regeneration of our forests. Finally, the state needs to responsibly manage the leasing program to control the explosive growth of Marcellus Shale gas production and the impact it may have on state lands. Also, despite the anticipated funds generated by the leasing program, the need to support and oversee the Marcellus gas leases and activity will actually require an increase in costs and staff for the Bureau of Forestry.

Along with ensuring continued funding, it is recommended that more stringent policies be developed to minimize deforestation, continue assessments of royalties for future sustainability and DCNR's purchase of conservation easements to reduce the expansive rate of deforestation of private lands.

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- ASCE Policy Statement 503: [National Parks Infrastructure \(PS 503\)](#)