



House Appropriations Budget Hearing Testimony
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Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
March 23, 2023

Good afternoon, Chairman Harris, Chairman Grove, and members of the House Appropriations Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Governor's 2023-24 proposed budget for the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR).

Governor Shapiro is working to deliver real results for Pennsylvanians, including making Pennsylvania a place where families and businesses thrive and where everyone has the opportunity for a happy, healthy life. DCNR and its partners play a key role in this vision, helping provide and protect the parks, trails, clean water, breathtaking landscapes, and other amenities that ensure both quality of life and economic growth—benefiting Pennsylvania's communities, businesses, and residents alike.

DCNR's mission to conserve and sustain Pennsylvania's natural resources for present and future generations has never been more important: last year there were nearly 38 million state park visits, a higher total than in pre-pandemic years. People rely on state parks and forests—and local parks, trails, and preserves funded by DCNR grants—to maintain their mental and physical health, to find joy and adventure, and to make memories with loved ones. Whether someone is a lifelong outdoors enthusiast or went hiking for the first time during the pandemic, DCNR makes it possible for them to

enjoy Pennsylvania's forests and mountains and waterways, as well as parks and trails in their community.

By conserving and stewarding our Commonwealth's natural resources, DCNR is vital to Pennsylvania's booming outdoor recreation industry. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, this industry—which ranges from the design and manufacture of outdoor equipment to the professional services of fishing guides and construction workers—adds almost \$14 billion of value to the Pennsylvania economy and supports 152,000 jobs. Beyond these direct economic contributions, outdoor recreation opportunities drive tourism across the Commonwealth. For example, the Great Allegheny Passage generates \$800,000 a year in economic impact per mile of trail—a \$121 million impact for the entire trail—revitalizing rural southwest Pennsylvania communities. Outdoor recreation's effectiveness at attracting tourism revenue is complemented by its role in attracting new businesses and industries to Pennsylvania, for which it is just as important as market access, corporate tax rates, and energy costs.

A key element of this proposed budget is funding to create a Pennsylvania Office of Outdoor Recreation to unite, grow, and strengthen Pennsylvania's outdoor economy. Last year, DCNR hired Pennsylvania's first director of outdoor recreation. By creating an office, Pennsylvania will join 18 other states that have recognized the power of outdoor recreation to empower economic growth; retain and attract new residents; drive tourism; expand access to the outdoors; and improve public health and community wellbeing. Pennsylvania will be the largest state—in both population and economy—to seize this transformative opportunity.

The budget also makes a major investment—the largest in a generation—in our system of 124 state parks and 2.2 million acres of state forests, which faces a documented \$1.4 billion maintenance backlog. Combined with the \$75 million of ARPA money allocated for parks and forests in last year’s budget, \$112 million will allow DCNR to fix aging dams, bridges, roads, and other infrastructure in every corner of the Commonwealth that is crucial for visitors to enjoy these public lands safely. And because DCNR often contracts with locally owned and operated engineering, construction, and landscaping companies, much of this money will be infused directly into local economies.

In addition to these highlights, DCNR’s proposed total budget of \$621.5 million allows the agency to continue and expand other core work and initiatives, including:

- Ensure that public lands are safe, welcoming, and accessible for Pennsylvanians of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities, while also working towards the goal of having a park or trail within 10 minutes of every Pennsylvanian.
- Provide grant funding for conservation and recreation projects in communities across the Commonwealth. Last year, DCNR staff worked hard to execute a special fall grant round to invest \$25 million in ARPA funds in communities, and we are well-positioned to continue investing in parks, playgrounds, trails, and green spaces that improve health outcomes, generate revenue, and build community character for decades to come. These grants would not be possible without dedicated funds such as the Keystone Fund and Environmental Stewardship Fund.

- Bolster youth engagement and workforce development through the Pennsylvania Outdoor Corps. This program offers work experience, job training, and educational opportunities to young people who complete recreation and conservation projects, helping them gain real-world experience and skills that will make them more attractive job candidates for Pennsylvania businesses.
- Collaborate with local stakeholders to plant thousands of trees along waterways and in cities, which helps reduce heat; prevent costly, dangerous flooding; and keeps the water safe for drinking, fishing, and swimming.
- Implement climate-resiliency strategies to protect Pennsylvanians and our natural resources from severe storms, invasive species, wildfires, and other impacts of climate change that threaten lives, the economy, and our natural resources.
- Pioneer energy efficiency and sustainability practices that save money, reduce carbon emissions, and support renewable-energy jobs. This proposed budget includes a boost in funding for geological mapping and modeling to capitalize on opportunities for carbon capture and storage.
- Protect residents and communities through essential services such as collecting geological and seismic data and training community firefighters.

DCNR staff members work tirelessly in service of our agency's mission to conserve and sustain Pennsylvania's natural resources for present and future generations. I'm incredibly proud of them.

We look forward to partnering with you in the coming year to further our mission and ensure that people, businesses, and communities across our Commonwealth can thrive.