



**House Tourism & Economic & Recreational Development Committee Testimony**

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**Department of Conservation and Natural Resources**

**April 25, 2023**

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Daley, Chairwoman Oberlander, and members of the House Tourism and Economic and Recreational Development Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss how DCNR is growing Pennsylvania's economy and working to provide access to outdoor recreation for all Pennsylvanians.

**Outdoor Recreation Economy**

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 Governor Shapiro's 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 Nathan Reigner, 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.

### **Recreation for All**

Ensuring access to outdoor recreation for all Pennsylvanians is a central part of DCNR's mission. One of DCNR's major goals is every Pennsylvanian living within 10 minutes of a park or trail. In 2019, DCNR partnered with the Trust for Public Land and WeConservePA on a first-of-its-kind analysis to examine who in Pennsylvania has outdoor recreation access within 10 minutes of home—and more importantly, who does not. We are now expanding that analysis to better account for diversity, equity, and inclusion priorities, examining the entire state at the census block group level and layering park and trail access with demographic, socioeconomic, health, and other key factors. This improved analysis will allow us to measure progress toward our goal, better identify communities of need, and inform decisions about where to prioritize investment in recreational amenities. The provided handout explains this work in greater

depth, and our staff has created a website for you to explore the data:

<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/458cf16e09a54efa91dccc32f76e5e9>

DCNR has also installed “Nature for All—Everyone Is Welcome Here” trailhead welcome signs in state parks and forests to promote inclusive public lands. And in 2022, thanks to money allocated in the budget, DCNR established three new state parks: Big Elk Creek, Susquehanna Riverlands, and Vosburg Neck. Criteria for choosing the locations included proximity to population centers and unmet demand for outdoor recreation in the area.

### **Community Grants**

Through the Community Conservation Partnerships Program (C2P2), DCNR provides grants to nonprofits and local governments in every corner of the Commonwealth for parks, playgrounds, ballfields, trails, and land conservation.

2022 was a huge year for the C2P2 program: DCNR granted \$92 million for 335 funded projects, the highest amount of grant funding available in a decade, and these grants leveraged even more money from local matches. (This includes a special fall grant funded in part by \$25 million in ARPA money allocated in the budget that awarded \$41.6 million for 98 projects, many in small or distressed communities.) Overall, DCNR’s 2022 C2P2 grant funding supported 43 trail projects, preservation of 7,100 acres of open space, and 162 community park projects. DCNR also granted \$11.8 million in tree planting grants for streamside buffers and street trees to prevent flooding, reduce urban heat, and protect clean water, \$8.8 million of which came from ARPA money in last year’s budget.

These local projects funded by DCNR grants attract tourists from near and far, while also improving quality of life in communities for the people who live there. They would not be possible without funding from dedicated funding sources like the Keystone Fund and Environmental Stewardship Fund.

### **State Parks and Forests**

During the pandemic, many people discovered or re-discovered the benefits of the outdoors by visiting state parks and forests, which remained open thanks to the hard work of our dedicated staff. Though the pandemic is behind us, DCNR continues to welcome millions of annual visitors from across the state and country to our 124 state parks and 2.2 million acres of state forests. In 2022, an estimated 37.9 million people visited state parks, which is a decline from the 42.2 million in 2021 but is still higher than the average of the three pre-COVID years. And reservations for overnight facilities (such as campgrounds and cabins) remain much higher than before the pandemic.

However, there is a documented \$1.4 billion maintenance backlog in state parks and forests that prevents Pennsylvania from fully capitalizing on the revenue generation and overall economic impact of outdoor recreation. Many of the facilities were constructed decades ago, and essential infrastructure like dams, roads, and sewer systems require repairs to allow visitors to safely enjoy the parks and forests—and continue coming back.

DCNR is using \$75 million in ARPA money allocated in last year's budget to complete high-priority infrastructure projects, and Governor Shapiro's budget allocates \$112 million—the largest investment in a generation—to allow DCNR to complete even

more high-priority projects. In addition to attracting more people to state parks and forests, these investments will save the Commonwealth money in the long run by fixing problems before they become even more dangerous and expensive. They will also inject money into communities through the locally owned companies DCNR contracts to complete the work.

Thank you for giving us the chance to speak with you today. We look forward to partnering with you to further our mission and ensure that people, businesses, and communities across our Commonwealth thrive.

# Priority Communities Analysis

## Incorporating DEI into State Outdoor Recreation Grants

### Outdoor recreation is woven into the fabric of Pennsylvania.

Public lands provide opportunities for Pennsylvanians to enjoy time outside, relieve stress, and get fit. They are also assets that increase nearby property values and support a \$14 billion outdoor recreation industry. In short, they make Pennsylvania communities better places to work, play, and live.

For all these reasons, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) has set a goal of every Pennsylvanian living within 10 minutes of a park or trail. In 2019, DCNR partnered with the Trust for Public Land and WeConservePA on a first-of-its-kind analysis to examine [who in Pennsylvania has outdoor recreation access](#) within 10 minutes of home—and more importantly, who doesn't.

In 2022, DCNR expanded that analysis to better account for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) priorities. Released in early 2023, [the updated analysis](#) examines the entire state at the census block group level and layers park and trail access with demographic, socioeconomic, health, and other key factors.

This improved analysis will allow DCNR to measure progress toward our recreation access goal, better identify communities of need, and inform decisions about where to focus investment in recreational amenities.

### Why This Analysis Matters

When many Pennsylvanians think of DCNR, they think of state parks and forests. But DCNR is also the state's largest funder of local outdoor recreation and conservation projects, thanks to its flagship

grant program, the Community Conservation Partnerships Program (C2P2).

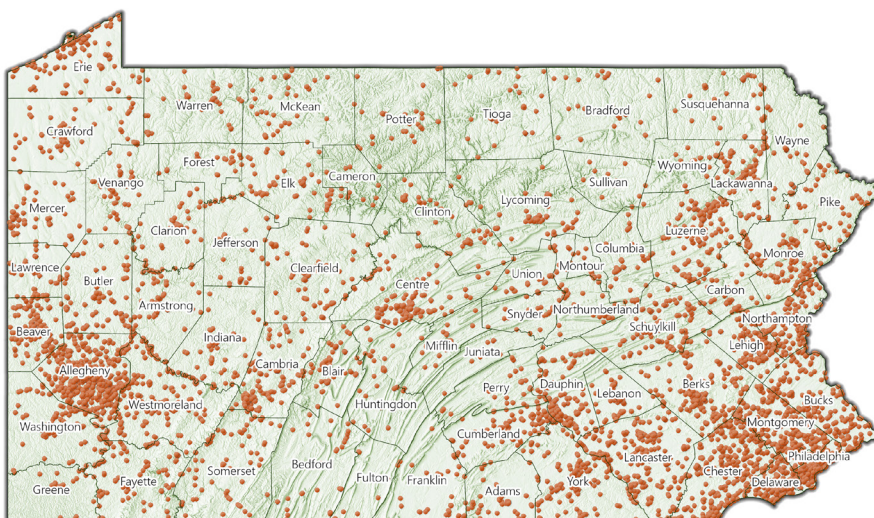
Since its start in 1995, C2P2 has funded more than 8,000 local projects totaling over \$1.1 billion in awards. These projects have occurred in every Pennsylvania county, and 90 percent of Pennsylvanians live in a municipality with at least one C2P2-funded project.

Yet even with all this investment, nearly half of Pennsylvanians lack close-to-home outdoor recreation access, including more than 1.4 million children.

Just having access is not enough, either. Many city parks are overcrowded and in need of renovation, especially those in predominantly nonwhite and low-income areas.

In a national analysis, the Trust for Public Land found that on average, parks serving majority nonwhite neighborhoods are half the size of those that serve majority white populations. They're also five times more crowded.

Using data and geographic information systems (GIS) analysis, DCNR can better focus its grant dollars on these high-need communities and help close the inequality gap in access to nature.



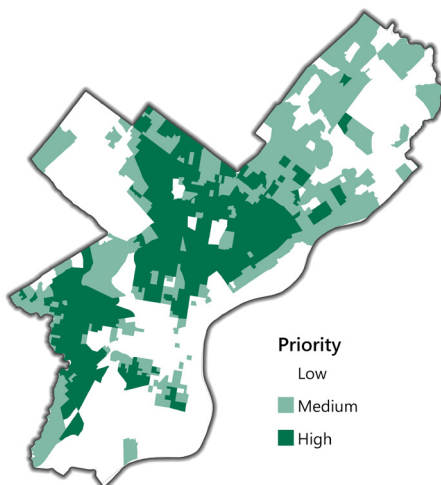
Map of C2P2-funded projects since 1995.

## How the Analysis Was Done

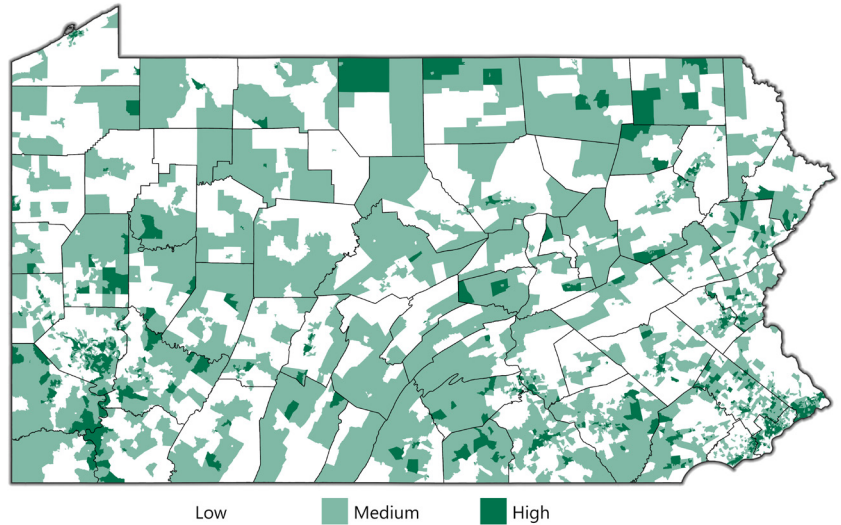
The 2019 analysis focused on the presence or absence of outdoor recreation facilities. The new, expanded analysis includes that data, but it adds more variables to better account for DEI priorities. The expanded analysis included 16 variables across four categories:

- **Demographics** – proportions of minority, low-income, disability, and youth/seniors
- **Recreation Need** – percentages of communities lacking ten-minute access to public land, trailheads, and recreational water access
- **Health Data** – averages for obesity, high blood pressure, mental health, and health insurance
- **Environmental Health** – assessments of community walkability, urban heat island effects, and air and water quality

The analysis evaluated each of Pennsylvania's more than 10,000 census block groups against county



Analyzing at the block group level allowed neighborhood-scale prioritization, especially in large cities like Philadelphia.



The Priority Communities Analysis identified 60 percent of Pennsylvania block groups as Medium or High Priority for additional outdoor recreation investment.

averages. Using county averages ensured that priority communities would be identified across the state, rather than being concentrated in a few large cities.

A [full methods document](#) is available for those who want a more detailed examination of how the analysis was conducted.

## Using Data to Improve Recreation Access

Demand for DCNR grants has risen steadily over the past decade. Since 2012, annual funding requests have more than doubled. On average, DCNR is only able to award about half of the requested funding.

Many of the same communities that lack recreation access also struggle to compete for state grants. For example, rural municipalities and those with lower incomes often lack professional grant writers that wealthier communities can afford.

DCNR's data-driven approach will help the agency focus grants on the best projects, rather than the ones that can best fill out a state form.

The agency saw early success with this approach in its Fall 2022 C2P2 funding round, which prioritized small and distressed communities. The agency was able to direct funding to these communities at higher rates than it had in previous rounds.

As useful as this analysis is, it cannot take the place of professional staff evaluating potential projects. Project managers in DCNR's Bureau of Recreation and Conservation will use this analysis as another tool in their toolbox when recommending projects for funding.

Every Pennsylvanian deserves access to quality parks, trails, and public lands. DCNR looks forward to using this analysis to grow its partnerships with communities of all types and achieve Pennsylvania's goal of Recreation for All.

Scan or click this QR code to view the Priority Community Analysis interactive map.

