

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy Policy Position
Natural Gas Development in Pennsylvania
June 1, 2010

Background

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC) protects and restores exceptional places to provide our region with clean waters and healthy forests, wildlife and natural areas for the benefit of present and future generations. To advance our mission, WPC collaborates with private landowners, state and federal agencies, local governments, conservation partners and a variety of grassroots organizations. WPC has played a leadership role in identifying the most ecologically significant locations throughout the Commonwealth, and has protected more than 228,000 acres of natural lands in Pennsylvania through acquisitions of properties or conservation easements. These areas include large tracts of unbroken forest, high quality watersheds, and rare habitats, harboring a diverse variety of native plants and animals. WPC seeks to protect these exceptional places through collaboration with our partners, working together to advance mutual conservation goals.

Over the last several years Western Pennsylvania has seen a dramatic increase in the amount of exploration and extraction of natural gas, especially for the gas in the Marcellus shale formation far deeper than the shallow gas that historically has been extracted. The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy recognizes that there are a number of different energy sources including coal, wind, gas, oil, solar, biomass, hydropower and nuclear. It is essential that the development of these energy sources in Pennsylvania safeguards the significant ecological places that make our state a very special place.

Broad Perspective

For all resource exploration and extraction, the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy supports minimizing the impact of surface disturbance in ecologically sensitive areas and other important conservation areas. Areas identified through the county natural heritage inventories, as well as other local and regional planning initiatives, play a vital role in supporting the full array of native species and habitats in Pennsylvania, as do the Commonwealth's remaining tracts of intact forestland and wildlife migratory corridors. To ensure the long-term viability of Pennsylvania's native plants, animals, habitats and other important conservation values, WPC supports and encourages:

- use of data from the Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program and other conservation planning tools to guide natural gas development to protect these ecologically significant locations;
- pre- and post-construction monitoring of priority forests, streams, and other important habitats to guide appropriate restoration and lessen potential fragmentation and water quality and quantity impacts;
- development of "best management practices" for the siting and development of all infrastructure including for natural gas extraction, the placement of wells, roads, pipelines, compressor stations and pits; and

- collaboration among government entities, conservation organizations, industry, and the public to balance energy needs with the protection of ecologically significant animals, plants, and habitats, and other important conservation, recreation, historic or scenic areas.

WPC does not typically endorse nor oppose individual projects, in order to use its resources on broader conservation issues and to focus on conserving exceptional places. WPC focuses on issues that are sufficiently broad in scope and potential impact to advance the organization's conservation goals.

Collaboration with State Agencies that Manage State Parks, State Forests and State Game Lands

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy supports multiple uses of our state forest lands. To ensure that the most ecologically sensitive areas in our state forest lands are excluded from leasing for gas exploration, WPC has shared science-based information with the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) to assist the department professionals in assessing the conservation sensitivity of unleased lands and in mapping categorical exclusion areas of significant conservation areas such as old growth forests and important wildlife habitats. The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy also updates records of occurrences of rare species on state game lands and other public lands that provide important data for resource management including decisions on leasing lands for natural gas exploration and extraction.

The leasing of state forest lands for natural gas extraction has greatly accelerated since 2008 as a result of the opportunity and demand for extraction of Marcellus shale gas. In part this acceleration of leasing state forest lands has occurred to meet short-term state budget gaps.

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy supports placing a temporary moratorium on additional leasing of state forest lands until a science-based study can be completed on the impacts of this activity. It is extremely important that DCNR has the opportunity to collect necessary data and fully understand all the impacts associated with the extraction of natural gas. This is essential in determining whether remaining unleased significant conservation lands can be leased without compromising intact forest areas, wildlife habitat, water quality and our spectacular recreational, cultural and scenic destinations such as the Poconos and the Laurel Highlands. An impact study is also vitally important for the purpose of developing science-based strategies to responsibly manage the natural gas extraction activity on state forest land.

Given the tremendous acceleration of leasing land for natural gas extraction, certification of our state forests is also at risk. Pennsylvania's state forest land was the first sustainably managed public forest system to be certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in the United States. Not only does this help provide assurance of continued sustainable management of our forest system, FSC certification also provides the forest products industry with a source of certified wood to meet strong market demand. It is crucial that Pennsylvania's state forest system continues to meet certification requirements.

In its 78-year history, the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy alone has protected over 228,000 acres of conservation lands and conveyed 175,000 acres of its conserved properties to the Commonwealth for inclusion in state parks, forests and game lands. Our investment has been significant. It is essential that significant conservation lands in our state forest system --- those conveyed by Western Pennsylvania Conservancy as well as all of the state forest lands --- are managed for all uses through a science-based approach to ensure the long-term good health of the forest system for present and future generations. The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy understands the economic challenges facing our state; however, it would not be prudent to jeopardize our magnificent state forest lands to meet short-term budget gaps by leasing additional lands for natural gas extraction until there is a complete understanding of the full effect of this activity.

Collaboration with the State Regulatory Agency

WPC staff members serve on several Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection committees that provide input that the department uses to make decisions on appropriate fees, policies, regulations and enforcement related to natural gas exploration and extraction — particularly regarding siting guidelines and water quality and quantity impacts. WPC supports appropriate regulations and enforcement that will minimize the environmental impacts of natural gas extraction and supports appropriate levels of permit fees associated with oversight.

Collaboration with the Natural Gas Industry

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy has met with representatives of several natural gas extraction companies in an effort to build understanding of and appreciation for protecting significant ecological areas as these companies determine where to site wells and other related infrastructure. In addition, we have offered to provide assistance in developing management strategies around extraction activities that will minimize or eliminate negative impacts. All the information that WPC has shared has come through intense analysis of the Commonwealth's important ecological areas that was conducted in collaboration with conservation partners.

Note:

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy has developed a conservation guidance document to assist in decision-making around natural gas exploration and extraction for landowners, partners and others. This document, *Conservation Guidance for Landowners on Natural Gas Development*, is available on the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy website at [this link](#).