

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy Wind Energy Statement

December 2007

Background

The mission of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC) is to protect, conserve and restore land and water for the diversity of the region's plants, animals and their ecosystems. Through science-based strategies, collaboration, leadership and recognition of the relationship between humankind and nature, WPC achieves tangible conservation outcomes for present and future generations.

To advance our mission, WPC collaborates with private landowners, state and federal agencies, local governments, conservation districts, and a variety of grassroots organizations. WPC has played a leadership role in advancing Pennsylvania's Natural Heritage Program (PNHP) which has identified the most ecologically significant locations throughout the Commonwealth. These areas include large tracts of unbroken forest, high-quality watersheds, and unique habitats, harboring a diverse variety of native plants and animals. WPC seeks to protect these unique places through collaboration with our partners, working together to advance mutual conservation goals.

The development of wind energy facilities is occurring throughout Pennsylvania and is playing a role in reducing some of the negative environmental effects of fossil-fueled electricity generation. Some of the locations within Pennsylvania that feature the most desirable winds for energy development, however, overlap with areas of high ecological significance. Upon the ridges of central and western Pennsylvania, where high wind speeds are often present, can be found many of most biologically-rich forests and streams in the Commonwealth. These forested ridges are also important pathways for bird migration.

While more remains to be learned about the ecological impacts of wind energy development, existing research indicates bats and migratory birds are susceptible to mortality from collisions with wind turbines. Wind energy development can also fragment large tracts of forest, reducing habitat for plants and animals that thrive only in unfragmented woodlands.

Policy

WPC supports the development of renewable energy sources, including wind, in locations that do not negatively affect the integrity of biologically significant areas of Pennsylvania. Areas identified through the county natural heritage inventories play a vital role in supporting the full array of native species and habitats in Pennsylvania, as do the commonwealth's remaining tracts of unfragmented forestland and migratory pathways. To ensure the long-term viability of Pennsylvania's native plants, animals, and habitats, WPC supports and encourages:

- use of the PNHP data as a planning tool to guide wind energy development siting on a state-wide and local level to protect these ecologically significant locations;

- development of wind energy facilities on lands where ecological impacts from wind energy development will most likely be minimal.
- continued research to fill data gaps regarding the ecological impacts of wind energy development;
- rigorous pre- and post- construction monitoring for ecological impacts, and appropriate mitigation based on the results of this monitoring;
- the development of “Best Management Practices” for the siting of wind energy developments in Pennsylvania;
- and collaboration among government entities, conservation organizations, and the public to balance our energy needs with the protection of ecologically significant animals, plants, and habitats.

Actions

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy is often asked to support or oppose specific development projects, as has been the case with wind energy development. WPC typically does not endorse nor oppose individual projects; rather, WPC advances its conservation mission through on-going scientific inquiry and collaboration with our partners. WPC directs its resources to areas where we can be most effective in achieving our mission. With regards to wind energy development, WPC is seeking proactive, collaborative actions that will help balance energy needs with the protection the Commonwealth’s full array of plants, animals, and habitats. To that end, WPC is:

- expanding tracking by PNHP of migratory flyways, important animal assemblages, and other ecological attributes that can inform wind energy development decisions;
- conducting research to expand our understanding of the ecological impacts of wind energy development;
- updating PNHP data to ensure current information is available to guide decisions regarding the siting of wind energy development
- supporting the efforts of the statewide Wind and Wildlife Collaborative by providing ecological data, results from research, and other analyses that can inform the collaborative’s decision-making process;
- meeting with wind energy producers to determine how energy needs can be met while protecting ecologically significant areas;
- and collaborating with our partners to ensure that ecological data plays a prominent role in guiding where wind energy development occurs in Pennsylvania.