

Western Pennsylvania Conservancy
Protecting Ecological Resources Threatened by Land Development
Adopted by the Board of Directors
December 6, 2012*

The purpose of this statement is to establish a foundation for policy positions related to various forms of development and the protection of land, water, and wildlife --- the core of Western Pennsylvania Conservancy's (WPC) mission for over 80 years. WPC believes that through careful planning based on sound science and adherence to best management practices, impacts from land development activities can be greatly reduced to ensure long term protection of Pennsylvania's rich natural resources.

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, and outdoor recreational opportunities 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 233,000 acres of natural lands in Pennsylvania through acquisition of properties or conservation easements. These special areas include large tracts of unbroken forest, lands in high quality watersheds, and rare habitats harboring a diverse variety of native plants and animals.

High Value Ecological Areas:

WPC considers areas of high ecological value as a conservation priority. These areas play a vital role in preserving natural resources threatened by forest fragmentation, water pollution, changing climate conditions, loss of wildlife habitat and the spread of invasive species. WPC supports safeguarding our land and water resources as all forms of development occur, with special consideration for high value ecological places that have been identified and mapped by WPC and its conservation partners. WPC supports the use of data and landscape planning tools by developers in siting and planning activities to protect our natural resources.

High value ecological areas, identified through the Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program, county natural heritage inventories and other local and regional planning initiatives, play a vital role in supporting the full array of native species and habitats in Pennsylvania. To ensure the long-term viability of Pennsylvania's native plants, animals, habitats and other important natural resources on these and other areas, WPC supports and encourages:

- use of data from the Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program and other conservation planning tools to guide science based decision making on siting, development, and restoration to protect natural resources, with special consideration for ecologically significant locations;
- pre- and post-construction monitoring of sensitive species and other specific environmental quality parameters to identify potential negative impacts to

- ecologically sensitive, high value conservation areas from habitat fragmentation, changes to water quality and quantity, and to evaluate restoration efforts;
- development of and adherence to “best management practices” to minimize impacts to forests, waterways, wetlands and source waters and guide restoration activities when applicable;
 - restoration of all areas on or close to construction sites impacted during the development stages but not needed upon project completion;
 - use of native vegetation to reduce surface run-off, control invasive plant species, and other site management activities to reduce impacts;
 - collaboration among government entities, conservation organizations, developers, and the public to balance development needs with the protection of our lands and waters and ecologically significant animals, plants, and habitats, and other important conservation values.

WPC does not typically endorse or oppose individual projects, in order to use its resources on broader conservation issues and to focus on conserving exceptional ecological places. WPC focuses on issues that are sufficiently broad in scope and potential impact to advance the organization’s conservation goals.

Land Conservation Approach:

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy focuses on protecting high value conservation lands in Western Pennsylvania through purchases and gifts. When acquiring properties, the Conservancy seeks to obtain all property rights in order to maximize protection of these lands. WPC realizes that this may not be possible in some cases, as certain rights may have been previously severed or the landowner may be unwilling to convey certain rights. As opportunities arise to protect properties, WPC will evaluate the potential and actual impacts on each property from all withheld, leased or severed rights to determine whether and how the property’s conservation values can be protected. When possible, and for protection purposes, certain rights will be limited by agreement with surface and subsurface owners.

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy transfers most of the exceptional ecological lands it acquires to state and federal land management agencies. These agencies have a long history of working with WPC by providing substantial funding to acquire these properties that the agency will then own and make available to the public. In keeping with its mission, WPC will protect the high value ecological properties it conveys to the agencies by reserving or restricting certain rights when appropriate, particularly when WPC contributes its own funds to acquiring properties. Because every property and transaction is unique, WPC will work closely with the agencies to negotiate appropriate protections for each property taking into consideration new technologies that may eliminate or greatly reduce land, water, and habitat impacts.

WPC supports sustainable management of public lands to protect rare, threatened and endangered species, intact forests, wildlife habitat and corridors, and clean waters. The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy opposes development on the conservation lands it has historically conveyed to the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Pennsylvania Game Commission, and the U.S. Forest Service. Moreover, the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy opposes development on highly sensitive ecological areas, as

identified in the Pennsylvania Forest Conservation Analysis and other studies, in State Parks, Forests, Game Lands, and National Parks, Forests and Recreation areas.

Over its history, WPC has retained ownership of certain high value conservation lands. These holdings represent special natural areas or conservation lands important to WPC programs such as the Bear Run Nature Reserve in Fayette County. The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy will protect the conservation values of these lands. When the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy sells conservation properties to private buyers, it will permanently restrict uses that represent threats to protection of the conservation values.

Conclusion:

The policies of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy regarding protection of ecological resources threatened by land development activities will be shared with the public through WPC's website, interaction with public officials, commissions, funders, and the media to help build awareness and commitment to sustainability of our natural resources.