



**PennFuture**

**Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing  
September 15, 2020**

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PennFuture**

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to address the Senate Democratic Policy Committee on the impact COVID-19 has had on outdoor recreation in the Commonwealth.

I am Jacqui Bonomo, president of PennFuture, a statewide environmental advocacy organization working on clean air, water, energy and climate issues. I am speaking to you from my home in beautiful northeast Pennsylvania, in southern Luzerne County, as our organization has instituted a mandatory work from home policy since mid-March.

As someone who began my environmental career almost 35 years ago by protecting a large area of public land that became today's Nescopeck State Park, I have a real appreciation for the value of the outdoor places Pennsylvanians and visitors go to recreate.

Back in my early days, my world view focused on public parks, forests, game lands, and natural areas through the lens of the incredible biodiversity they harbor. But the value those places provide—as a source of fresh air and a quiet escape—are equally important.

Likewise, as a former river guide who worked for many years on the Lehigh River, on a stretch from White Haven to Jim Thorpe that makes up Lehigh Gorge State Park, I have an appreciation for the economic value of public lands as drivers of so much of Pennsylvania's outdoor recreation economy, and the great many jobs and network of small businesses they anchor.

The values of these places have been dramatically spotlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. People are seeking a respite from the walls of their homes. They're using them as a safe place to recreate. And others are using them as a source of clean air, including those that suffer from asthma and other respiratory ailments. Pennsylvania's outdoor, natural spaces have been providing a crucial source of greenery, ample space to socially distance, and so much more in the midst of this public health crisis.

Taxpayers are getting an overwhelming bang for their buck. The Commonwealth's past investments in our magnificent public forests, parks and waters—in the Poconos, in the Laurel Highlands and PA Wilds, in city and town playgrounds, among others—are

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proving to be absolutely the right thing for the physical and mental well-being for the people of our state.

These natural places—and the public investments that have protected and managed them—have also had profound impacts on our state economy. The Outdoor Industry Association estimated that outdoor recreation businesses generated over \$29 billion in economic activity and support 250,000 jobs. Our state parks, under normal times, underpin over \$1 billion in economic benefit.

But these aren't normal times, as we all know. Bicycle sales are up more than 120%. Kayak sales are up by 85%. Camping reservations are up 85%. Over 45 million people have visited our state parks so far this year well over the 37 million visitors in all of 2019. Generations old and new are re-connecting with nature at an astounding rate.

But the pandemic has also put strain and pressure on these places, its workers, and the infrastructure that anchor the surge in outdoor activity we are seeing. As today's testimony from the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources will attest, the intensity of park use during the pandemic is straining and possibly even damaging these places, which were already struggling with infrastructure backlogs and lack of staffing before the pandemic.

It's these facts—this inimitable connection between Pennsylvanians and nature—that puts into question the policy decisions of the last decade and the debates we've witnessed in the halls of the Capitol this year. During my time with PennFuture, the state has consistently made the wrong decisions on which industries it will prop up. Lawmakers have raided funds dedicated to land protection and acquisition while also directing massive subsidies and tax payer dollars toward fracked gas and, most recently, petrochemicals. In the midst of a pandemic, policymakers in the House debated bills that would have raided the Environmental Stewardship Fund and Keystone Recreation, Parks, and Conservation Fund further.

We have deprioritized funding of park infrastructure and agency personnel, leaving places and staff unprepared to deal with this current situation. Elected officials have treated core funding such as Keystone and the Environmental Stewardship Funds as fungible—indeed, there is nothing like this pandemic to prove out these funds are critical and not to be tampered with.

Despite being central to our economy and our wellbeing, legislators' support for nature-based industries and green spaces is eroding. Our outdoor recreation industry is not getting the support it needs, in spite of the support it is giving us at this trying time.

While I was taking a drive with my mother through the Poconos on a Sunday afternoon recently, at a trailhead accessing a place called Hawk Falls in Hickory Run State Park, the scene was almost indescribable: cars lining the road for a mile in either direction, with people streaming into the area, many carrying coolers, some carrying beach umbrellas, to a place of such natural beauty in that park. This scene is playing out everywhere and state policymakers should take that into account when they consider

cutting investments in green spaces again, or want to make it harder for people to use these public spaces by charging an entrance fee.

Instead, I call on policymakers to advance more investments in these spaces so that our natural infrastructure can accommodate the growing number of people that want to use our beautiful and bountiful natural resources. I also call for a proper debate on how the state can help and support our outdoor recreation small businesses during this trying time.

Now is the time to support the agencies and local governments that manage our parks and public places. Now is the time to support the networks of small businesses that make up the backbone of our outdoor and tourism economy, and to create new work opportunities in new sectors.

And now is the time to level the playing field so that all Pennsylvanians, regardless of their being urbanites or rural residents, and regardless of what corner of the state that they reside, have equal access to these outdoor amenities by expanding our public parks and green places, which will remain important far into the future.

In July 2020, PennFuture published a *Green Stimulus and Recovery Platform for Pennsylvania* that makes recommendations for investments, job preservation and creation that will not only jump start our economic path out of this pandemic and recession, but create an economic recovery that leans into a very different future for our state where:

- We value public health over pollution;
- Access to green and wholesome places is more common than it is today;
- There are increased opportunities for work made available to people of all ages and skill levels, and for good wages;
- Money can be made by cleaning up the legacy pollution that communities around this state deal with by making an infusion of public funds into restoration work that will clean up the plethora of orphaned gas and oil works that are leaking methane and chemicals into our air and water daily and unabated;
- And where our middle class is increasingly strengthened through a growing network of small businesses that are financially and technically supported, forming the backbone of:
  - Our nature- based economies in tourism and agriculture
  - A more vital restoration and infrastructure sector that improves our water and air and
  - An exciting clean energy and energy efficiency sector to build on for our futures.