



**Senate Democratic Policy Committee
Informational Hearing on COVID-19 and Outdoor Recreation
September 15, 2020**

**Testimony of Frank Maguire
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Introduction

Chair Senator Boscola, host Senator Williams, and other members of the Senate Democratic Policy Committee, my name is Frank Maguire and I am the Program Director for Trails and Recreation for the Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC). Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's discussion on public recreation during the Covid-19 pandemic.

PEC is a statewide nonprofit organization that, for fifty years, has worked to advance collaborative programs and policies in the Commonwealth. A significant part of our mission is focused on building and enhancing recreational opportunities in every corner of the state. Our Trails and Outdoor Recreation program works on large-scale connectivity trail projects such as the Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition, the Northeast Trails Forum, and the Circuit Trails, bringing trails closer to all Pennsylvanians. We also provide assistance to communities to solve technical issues, leverage state and federal grant funds, and achieve sustained success.

PEC Report Summary

In late March of this year, as schools started closing and public concern about the spread of Covid-19 was increasing, we began hearing anecdotal evidence that trail use was up dramatically across the state, regardless of trail type. In an effort to better measure and understand this increase, PEC commissioned a study which included a survey of trail managers from around the state, a review of media coverage, and an analysis of available trail counter data. The subsequent report - ***The Covid-19 Pandemic's Impacts on Pennsylvania's Non-motorized Trails***¹ - details the good and not-so-good of this increased use, all while pointing towards a possible long-term cultural change of more people exploring the outdoors and the recreational amenities available to them.

¹ Available online at <https://pecpa.org/press-releases/report-pa-trail-use-surges-amid-lockdowns/>

The main takeaway from this work is that the state's non-motorized trails have served as an invaluable outlet – both physical and mental – for Pennsylvanians during this pandemic. Whether in urban centers or rural communities, people have heard the encouragement to enjoy outdoor recreation close to home and have found refuge in our public lands and trails. But it also underscores limitations in terms of capacity and access.

Our review of the available comparative data for the month of March in 2018, 2019, and 2020 showed that every surveyed trail had significant increase in trail use – many over 100%. In April, 14 of the 16 trails showed similar numbers, but the two trails that were outliers might actually tell a more interesting story of the Pandemic. One of those trails, The Schuylkill Banks in downtown Philadelphia, was so crowded that the city actually closed the nearby MLK Drive to car traffic to relieve some of the pressure. The other trail was the Great Allegheny Passage in Ohiopyle State Park, which in April was officially closed to visitors.

In our survey of trail managers, it appeared that trails that were of short-to-medium distance experienced the increase of trail use as a net positive. This is likely because the trails are mostly a local resource and the managers themselves saw the trails as serving their community. Long distance or “destination” trails (those over 50 miles long) measure success through economic impacts, so the managers reported a net negative impact. Given that those longer trails have more of a traditional travel and tourism purpose, their managers expressed concerns about the economic impacts and broader long-term viability.

Diving into the Trail managers responses in depth was also revealing in terms of what it means for the future. The managers reported that they were seeing more families out on the trails. This has been reflected in bicycle sales across the state - many stores have sold out of inventory, and the demand (and wait times) for repair and maintenance services has gone through the roof.

In terms of capacity, many of the trail managers reported that their trailhead facilities such as parking lots were beyond capacity during these months. This speaks to a need for future expansion and more connections to eliminate pressure on the existing resources. Additionally, one of the other issues reported was an increase of trash, either from litter or suspension of trash pick up at the trail. Many local governments were forced to reduce or suspend park maintenance staff during the pandemic, and trails that rely on volunteers for routine maintenance faced their own challenges with providing service during this time.

Looking Ahead

Looking ahead, the good news is that people have had these assets to help them weather the Covid-19 pandemic, and increased use of our public forests, parks, and trails encourages healthier lifestyles for people of all ages in our Commonwealth at a time when they're needed most. The bad news is that these resources were already under considerable strain from a management and maintenance standpoint, and the fact remains that not every Pennsylvanian has equal access. These resources need your support.

Despite all the uncertainty caused by Covid, one thing we can definitively say is that our state's outdoor amenities are essential and in unprecedented demand, and they will remain so for the foreseeable future. We urge you to protect state programs that invest in these resources as budget decisions are made in the weeks and months ahead.

This isn't just about public wellness – it's also about protecting economic and job growth. Our public trails and lands help center a \$29 billion recreational economy that supports hundreds of thousands of jobs across Pennsylvania, resulting in billions of dollars in tax and business revenue.² These benefits are realized across our state – from local shops in trail communities to larger commercial and manufacturing facilities that have become increasingly prominent in Pennsylvania.

Every state dollar directed to outdoor recreation leverages more than its equal in private investment, in addition to tremendous levels of community and volunteer involvement. These are assets that will be in place and available for citizens and communities for years and generations to come.

Conclusion

We greatly appreciate the General Assembly's examination of these issues and welcome the chance to work with you on further enhancing all of our great places and opportunities here in the Commonwealth. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.

² See <https://outdoorindustry.org/state/pennsylvania/>