

**Senate Appropriations Budget Hearing**

**Remarks by Michael DiBerardinis**

*Secretary*

**Department of Conservation and Natural Resources**

**March 2, 2005**

Good Morning. Chairman Thompson, Senator Fumo, committee members, guests. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the budget priorities of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

Before we get into the details of DCNR's operating budget, let me first address Growing Greener II. I am still optimistic we will see passage of an environmental improvement package that will be acceptable for the Governor's signature. Most of us agree - Republicans and Democrats, House and Senate alike - there are pressing needs that get more urgent each passing day. The Governor remains strongly committed to his original Growing Greener II proposal, which, if passed, could bring millions more dollars to DCNR to help with infrastructure improvements, critical land protection and community conservation and recreation initiatives. I am hopeful we can come to an agreement on a proposal that works for our citizens and our environment.

Now, on to the core budget of DCNR. Governor Edward G. Rendell's fiscal 2005-06 budget proposes a lean, responsible government structure that responds fairly and appropriately to the challenges and needs this state faces. Rising health care costs, increased needs of medical assistance, and declining federal fiscal relief dollars are affecting Pennsylvania, as they are every other state in this nation. We at DCNR, like all other agencies, are doing our part to help close the fiscal gap created by these national implications.

There is no doubt that the 2005-06 fiscal year will be another difficult one on our parks, forests and people. But considering the fiscal climate, we fared reasonably well. The proposed budget creates about a \$4 million cut over last year, or 4 percent shortfall for our agency.

I am pleased to say that through creativity and reallocation of funding sources to cover our most pressing needs, we will not close any parks, lay off any full-time staff, or eliminate any full-time positions.

We intend to do this by using, for the first time, a two percent administrative allocation from Growing Greener and applying it to support administration of the Growing Greener funds,

as allowed by law. And where possible, instead of contracting out to do repair and improvements, we will look to create efficiencies by using some Growing Greener and Keystone funds to pay for our own staff to do the work at a cheaper rate. This also will help to augment our operating funds.

I believe this temporary shift in funds is both necessary and justified by the tight budget constraints we are facing. My goal and preference is to continue to make the maximum funding available for grants that are creating and developing local parks, providing greenways and trails, protecting open space and river corridors and repairing community recreation facilities. And, you can be assured that we will do everything in our power to make this happen.

This budget and approach will allow us to manage our state park system in relatively the same manner as last year – with selective service cuts at each park to cover operational expenses. We will continue to rely on park managers to make the best decisions for their parks.

As they were last year, certain services will continue within the state park system. Last year, part-time and seasonal staff hours were reduced, resulting in cutbacks in environmental education programming and routine maintenance and upgrades. Some parks chose to close or reduce the seasonal usage of certain areas of the park such as picnic pavilions, rest rooms and portions of campgrounds. Other parks cut back on routine maintenance. Several parks with beaches adopted DCNR's "Open Swim" policy, where patrons are allowed to swim at beaches without guards.

These service reductions will continue for fiscal year 2005-06. We don't expect much change over this current fiscal year. Each park will continue to manage its facilities in a manner that will have the least impact on the visitors. We plan to do our best in providing as many services as we can during these difficult times.

Our primary concern as we look to the future is maintaining the highest quality experience for our visitors through our services and programs. It is imperative we create and maintain a value-added system that benefits communities, leverages tourism-related investments, and realizes the true economic potential of the parks.

In our Bureau of Forestry, the budget reductions are being managed without affecting the health of our forests. Our recent re-certification continues to validate we are managing our forests in a way that protects their long-term health. The hardwoods in our state are some of the most sought-after in the world, and they continue to grow in value.

What is affecting the health of our forests is deer overpopulation. No doubt, most of you have heard from hunters about whether there are too few or too many deer. The Game Commission has been bombarded with complaints of fewer deer this past hunting season. What the hunters didn't report back on was the total devastation of the forest habitat and the inability of these areas to even hold a sufficient number of deer. Many hunters believe our motivations are dictated by the timber industry: kill more deer so we can grow and harvest more trees. The fact is deer overpopulation is a cross-cutting issue affecting all values of the forest including wildlife habitat, biodiversity, recreation, and wood supply. We manage 2.1 million acres of land for all these values and only harvest 14,000 acres each year.

So where do we go from here? From our perspective, there are two fundamental questions: What is the actual size of the herd? What should be the appropriate size of the herd?

To help answer the first question, DCNR is flying over many of our Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) areas and, through infrared imaging, we are getting a better understanding of the numbers of deer within these areas. This is not going to provide the final answer to this question, but we believe it can be one of the many fact-based tools we use. Our goal is to get the best census possible using highly sophisticated current and new technologies.

We believe, and I think the sportsmen's community and the Game Commission would agree, there must be a better understanding of how the herd is estimated. We need to achieve consensus where possible on the best methodologies or we will be involved in endless, unproductive debates about how many deer are actually out there.

On the second question, we feel the most difficult issues will revolve around how the appropriate size of the herd is determined. For DCNR the goal is pretty simple - the appropriate number is the number necessary to assure adequate regeneration and long-term health of our forests without having to fence out the deer.

DCNR will be initiating a major forest regeneration study in cooperation with the Game Commission to let the best science inform our decisions around this question. We are committed to undertaking this critical cooperative effort. We want hunters and others to understand clearly what is happening within the forest and the consequences of overabundant deer.

In the long run, a healthy forest habitat will allow for bigger, healthier deer, which will help Pennsylvania continue its hunting tradition. This is really about working together and building a better understanding of how to manage deer and restore forest habitat.

Elsewhere in DCNR's budget, our Bureau of Recreation and Conservation will be able to offer about \$37-\$40 million for community recreation, open space protection, rivers conservation, heritage tourism, greenways and trails in this budget. We are uncertain of the exact amount because we don't know the status of the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund. This is a comparable level to the current year.

Although we are reaching hundreds of communities and tackling many worthy projects, much is left undone. Currently, DCNR matches local investments so these much-needed funds are helping local communities leverage their funding and improve the quality of life for their residents. Estimated DCNR grant funds needed for the next eight years total almost \$1.1 **billion** to match the expected demand from communities and non-profits for conservation and recreation projects. These investments are important components of downtown revitalization efforts and waterfront development, meeting the park and recreation needs of rapidly growing communities, and rehabilitating and repairing existing recreation facilities in our cities and towns. We could substantially improve the quality of life in communities across the state if we had the additional funds outlined in the Governor's Growing Greener II plan.

Now I'd like to turn my remarks to a few exciting initiatives I think are of interest to this committee.

Armed with our newly completed action plan, we began last year in earnest tackling our priority initiatives. Governor Rendell's 2005-06 proposed budget allows us to continue our important work in support of our plan's four goals: improve the stewardship and management of our state parks and forests; promote statewide land conservation; build and maintain sustainable and attractive communities; and create outdoor connections for citizens and visitors.

**PA Wilds.** One of the key initiatives that addresses all four of our plan's goals is the PA Wilds project. PA Wilds is using the significant outdoor and heritage experiences available on our public land holdings to encourage the growth of tourism and tourism related-businesses in a 13-county area in Northcentral Pennsylvania.

Over the past year, we have launched a few early action projects to help improve the visitor experience in that region, the most significant of which is the Elk Scenic Drive. This 127-mile corridor passes through the heart of Elk Country, which draws tens of thousands of visitors each year to the region. In cooperation with PennDOT, we have signed the route to direct people to the 23 wildlife viewing areas and scenic overlooks along the route. At several of our parks and

forest stops, we have developed viewing areas that provide adequate parking and viewing "blinds" to allow visitors to come away with a rich viewing experience without disturbing the wildlife.

To manage this project successfully, we are working closely with tourist promotion agencies, small businesses, county and regional economic development agencies and local citizens to come up with the best enhancements to that region, both for the visitors and the local citizens. Some projects include:

- Design of a Welcome Center/Interpretive Center, Interpretive Lodge on I-80 at SB Elliot State Park -- the Gateway to the Wilds -- and design of the Sinnemahoning Wildlife Watching Center.
- Inventory of recreational assets of all park and forest facilities in the Wilds that will result in an outdoor recreation plan for the region
- Formation of a broad coalition to work aggressively at cleaning up acid mine drainage on the West Branch of the Susquehanna River.
- Completion of a Nature Tourism Business Incubator study
- Development of a Lumber Heritage Interpretive Plan

**Recreation Programming and Overnight Accommodations.** Historically, DCNR has served as a passive host to our visitors -- a place to swim or have a picnic or a nice place for a drive or walk. I believe we must strategically expand recreation programming within our system to connect more citizens with our natural resources. By actively engaging more people through recreation, DCNR can build greater relevancy in the lives of Pennsylvanians and be positioned to build a stronger constituency for a stewardship ethic. Through hands-on engagement and learning, visitors will strengthen their commitment to stewardship of the natural resource, land conservation, and recreation.

To that end, we are developing the structure for a statewide recreation program expansion in our parks and forests called Get Outdoors PA. As part of this program, we are going to be expanding our partnerships with organizations and businesses to offer more outdoor recreation learning experiences throughout the state.

This exciting initiative will allow people to explore new recreational experiences, learn about the natural world, engage in healthy activities, all the while contributing to the local economies through their visitation.

Another way to reach people not ordinarily coming to our parks is to expand the range of overnight accommodations. We believe that a small-scale inn or lodge could be a logical progression in the range of overnight options currently being offered. We are working on two feasibility studies to determine an appropriate size and design for possible lodges at SB Elliott State Park, as a gateway to the Wilds region, and at our newest state park, Erie Bluffs, located outside Erie.

**Wind Power.** The issue of climate change and excessive use of fossil fuels is part of the world's dialogue on the environment. We believe as the state's leading conservation agency and largest land managers we have an obligation to be a part of that dialogue. We strive to lead and exemplify science-based land management, conservation and sustainable development. We are taking on a proactive role in statewide initiatives to develop alternative energy sources, to model and demonstrate cleaner, cheaper energy sources, and to further advance use of sustainable energy at DCNR facilities. We are also trying to understand the role of our forests in helping to reduce global warming through carbon sequestration.

This year we are developing site selection criteria for potential alternative energy sources, analyzing alternative energy technology, and developing a long-term strategy for implementation. Of particular interest to me is wind energy. We are beginning to research the feasibility of whether wind turbines are viable on state forest lands and what impact they would have on lands, both positive and negative.

**Regional Conservation Partnerships.** In addition to the regional work we are doing in the PA Wilds, DCNR is developing a regional strategy that helps to respond to the conservation and recreation demands of a region. We are assembling the expertise of DCNR and working with other state and federal agencies as well as municipal and county governments and non-profits to promote good stewardship, sustainable growth, community revitalization, and partnership building in these regions.

A good example of this regional collaboration is **TreeVitalize**. There has been a quantifiable loss of tree cover in the five counties that make up Southeastern Pennsylvania, particularly in the densely populated communities within that region. The region has lost 8 percent of its heavy tree cover, about 5 million trees, during the past 15 years. This loss of tree cover adds to challenges facing this region, including deterioration of air and water quality.

In April 2004, through the leadership of DCNR, Governor Rendell helped to launch TreeVitalize, a five-year program to: raise public awareness of the need to plant and care for

trees in our communities; support planting and educational activities to restore and sustain tree cover; promote investment from private and public sector; encourage multi-municipal approaches, dialogue and regional collaboration; capture and document environmental benefits of increased tree cover; and use tree planting activities to build citizen stewardship.

In less than a year, we have raised millions of dollars, and attracted such partners as PECO, the Philadelphia Eagles, the Pennsylvania Landscape and Nursery Association, DEP, Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, Aqua Pennsylvania and many more.

This year we are targeting our priority communities for participation and providing training to citizens and local governments to carry our tree mission forward. And, of course, we'll be planting lots of trees. The goal is to plant 20,000 trees and 500 acres of streamside buffers over the five-year program.

Another regional conservation partnership that is advancing this year is our work on the newly named Lehigh Valley Greenway Initiative. In this regional project, DCNR is combining the expertise across several of its bureaus to help the communities in the Bushkill Creek watershed and the Lehigh Valley model sustainable growth, watershed protection, open space preservation and capacity building.

**Land Conservation.** Whether its managing 2.4 million acres of state park and forest lands or assisting communities with greenways, local parks, and open space protection, land conservation is central to our mission and defines DCNR as the state's leading land conservation agency.

As stewards of the state parks and forests, we must conserve lands that protect our existing system and our ecological assets. This includes acquiring land for buffers and other holdings within or around a park or forest.

Most of our efforts around land conservation, however, will be focused on developing conservation and smart growth strategies and partnerships with county and local governments and conservancies.

We are becoming an increasingly important part of county and local government's efforts to protect land. In certain areas of the state, the need to protect critical open spaces, natural areas, habitat and watersheds is growing. And it's not just in the Southeast either. To date, we have funded 35 county greenway and open space network plans that are helping local government prioritize their future conservation efforts...counties such as Mercer, Green, Cambria, Bedford, Columbia, Bradford, Luzerne, and Lackawanna. These grass roots initiatives are protecting our

natural resources, providing local recreation opportunities, and revitalizing communities across the state.

We intend to continue to provide both the leadership and the financial assistance to acquire and conserve land in collaboration with local and county government, non-profit partners, and private landowners with the involvement and support of county and local interests.

This does not necessarily mean that state government has to own land it helps to acquire or conserve. But we want to continue to provide the leadership and support in helping identify areas and in bringing partners together.

To help strengthen our capacity in this area, we are in the process of developing a comprehensive strategy for land acquisitions that will help target our investments and funding, refine priorities and deal with the issues of land management.

As you can see, we have a lot of exciting projects in the mix. Naturally, these priorities will have more long-term impact if we make serious long-term investments in them. That only can happen through an environmental improvement bond like the one the Governor has proposed over the past two budget cycles.

We have two weeks left to negotiate something real, something lasting. I would ask you to think about the communities you represent and what makes their quality of life better. I would bet that landscapes, open spaces, forests, parks, trails, and rivers are vital components of your most livable communities. Let's protect and enhance those areas. Let's dedicate the funds needed to create a lasting impact. If we say we care about our natural resources, then it's time to make the investment in their future.

When I took this job, I knew this agency did important work. It didn't take me long to realize just how important that work is in the lives of Pennsylvanians. As the steward and advocate of the state's natural resources, we have an enormous responsibility to uphold. I believe that our action plan spells out a clear vision to accomplish our mission.

I would encourage all of you to read further about our work in DCNR's action plan: *Shaping a Sustainable Future: DCNR's Blueprint for Action*. You each have a copy today of the summary of this plan. The full action plan is available on our website at [www.dcnr.state.pa.us](http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us).

Senators, I thank you and your colleagues for your support of our work over the past two years. I will look for your involvement in many of these initiatives I have outlined today.

Thank you.