

**Legislative Budget and Finance Committee**  
**A Study Pursuant to HR 87:**  
**The Current Status of Conservation Connectivity in Pennsylvania**  
**Report Presentation by Stevi Sprenkle, MPA, Project Manager**  
**June 12, 2024**

Good morning, Madam Chair and members of the Committee. I am pleased to be here today to discuss the results of our study pursuant to House Resolution 87 (HR 87).

From the smallest seed to the most enormous elk, over 25 thousand flora and fauna species share the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania with nearly 13 million people. You do not have to look far to see just how deeply rooted in history the importance of Pennsylvania's outdoors is. Pennsylvania's name itself translates to "Penn's Woods" in Latin. The commonwealth's constitution also firmly establishes the significance of Pennsylvania's natural resources. Article I, Section 27 states:

The people have a right to clean air, pure water, and to the preservation of the natural, scenic, historic and esthetic values of the environment. Pennsylvania's public natural resources are the common property of all the people, including generations yet to come. As trustee of these resources, the Commonwealth shall conserve and maintain them for the benefit of all the people.

The development of land in Pennsylvania for business and housing has created significant economic benefits; at the same time, this development has created negative consequences for the commonwealth's flora and fauna. Habitat fragmentation, or separating natural habitats into noncontiguous areas, prevents wildlife and plants from life-sustaining movement for food, water, mates, and other biologically necessary processes.

Conservation connectivity is one scientifically backed way to counter habitat fragmentation. HR 87 directed LBFC to study the current status, management, and benefits of conservation corridors.

Conservation corridors can mean different things; sometimes, it involves preserving existing natural corridors (such as rivers and mountain ranges); other times, it is designating areas as conservation zones or adding on to existing protected land (federal, state, or local parks); and other times, it prevents land from future development (easements). Conservation corridors can be as small as the neighborhood level or as large as the commonwealth itself. For example, Pennsylvania is a massive corridor for migrating species in North America.

Despite the lack of official public policy requiring the development or implementation of conservation corridors in Pennsylvania, we found many stakeholders at the federal, state, and local levels, directly and indirectly, employing conservation corridor practices as part of other conservation efforts and mandated requirements. At the commonwealth level, we found multiple state agencies and independent commissions working on aspects of conservation connectivity. These include the Departments of Agriculture (PDA), Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), Environmental Protection (DEP), and Transportation (PennDOT), along with the Fish and Boat (PFBC), Game (PGC), and Turnpike (PTC) Commissions.

PennDOT has constructed 35 wildlife crossing underpasses to make roadways safer for drivers and wildlife. The Turnpike Commission has constructed one wildlife underpass and is considering constructing a wildlife overpass with the redesign of the Allegheny Tunnel area. This is important because in 2022, over 4 percent of all vehicle crashes reported to PennDOT were animal-related. During the four-year scope of our report (2019 through 2022), there were tragically 44 human fatalities attributed to wildlife-vehicle collisions. Additionally, Pennsylvania drivers ranked first nationwide for the number of wildlife-vehicle collision auto insurance claims filed. According to State Farm estimates, over 153 thousand (153,397) wildlife-vehicle collision claims were filed in the state fiscal year ended 2022. Studies have shown that wildlife crossings coupled with exclusionary fencing can reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions by up

to 97 percent. In its research, the United States Department of Agriculture noted, "It actually costs society less to solve the problem of [wildlife-vehicle collisions] than it costs to do nothing."

State-owned land presents opportunities to connect adjoining habitats for conservation connectivity. There are currently 3.9 million acres of state-owned land managed by DCNR and PGC, including state forests, state game lands, and state parks. At times, opportunities arise to add to existing state-owned land. For example, in 2022, DCNR added new state parks in Chester, Wyoming, and York counties. According to DCNR, the state park in Wyoming County (Vosburg Neck) was added due to "significant pressure from residential and commercial development," and the newly added park in York County (Susquehanna Riverlands) was added because the site "adjoined and built on large tracts of already persevered open space." These considerations are conservation connectivity practices: preserving and protecting existing lands and reconnecting habitats.

When considering the expansion of state game lands, PGC's primary goals are to add lands adjacent to current game lands, conserve habitats, and provide connectivity. PGC land purchased through the Game Fund is statutorily limited to a maximum purchase price of \$400 per acre, a figure set in the 1980s. If the General Assembly deems expanding commonwealth-owned land a public policy priority in conservation connectivity, we recommend that it consider, at a minimum, an inflation adjustment to PGC's \$400 per acre land acquisition limit.

While commonwealth agencies and commissions have differing, yet sometimes overlapping, responsibilities, they have created partnerships among themselves. Likewise, these agencies have partnered with outside stakeholders such as federal agencies and nongovernmental organizations. Our report highlights partnerships employing and promoting conservation corridor practices, including the Statewide Wildlife Action Plan, Conservation Landscape Program, Greenways, Trails, and Recreation Program, and the Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program. One of the newer partnerships was established

in December 2023, when the Federal Highway Administration announced the award of a Wildlife Crossing Pilot Program grant for the Pennsylvania Wildlife Crossings Strategic Plan and Analytical Tools program. The grant was awarded to PennDOT and other commonwealth partners to develop a comprehensive strategic plan for wildlife crossings. The program has three phases, including developing a multi-agency statewide wildlife crossings strategic plan, improving wildlife-vehicle collision data collection and geographic information system mapping tools, and expanding public outreach. Work is expected to be completed by December 2027. We recommend the General Assembly consider requiring a study by the LBFC after implementing this program to provide an update on where Pennsylvania is in implementing conservation connectivity procedures.

Reviewing conservation connectivity practices in neighboring states (with similar landscapes, species, and climates) offered a comparison to gauge Pennsylvania's efforts. We found that most of the conservation connectivity tools surrounding states utilize are like Pennsylvania's. Through our research, we identified some areas for improvement for the commonwealth to consider. For example, in New Jersey, a robust working group was established for the specific purpose of conservation connectivity collaboration. We recommend that Pennsylvania take a similar approach by the Office of the Governor convening an official interagency and commission conservation connectivity working group to build on existing collaboration, including federal and non-governmental partners. We further recommend that this working group identify high-priority areas of conservation connectivity in Pennsylvania and establish common goals.

We also identified best practices in conservation corridor development, including wildlife crossings, preserving natural corridors, collaboration, and data collection. As part of this, we researched funding options for conservation corridors used in other states and potential revenue sources. Other states utilize a variety of funding sources for conservation corridors. Florida is an example of a state that, through unanimous legislative action in 2021, invested over \$400 million (with \$100 million reoccurring

annually) in protecting its wildlife corridors. If the Pennsylvania General Assembly deems conservation corridors a public policy priority, we recommend the consideration of funding to develop new and preserve existing conservation corridors.

In closing, I want to touch on how important outdoor recreation is in the commonwealth. Conserved areas provide recreation, community, lawful hunting, and fishing. In 2022, the outdoor recreation sector's added value totaled \$16.9 billion or 1.8 percent of the commonwealth's gross domestic product. This sector employs over 160 thousand individuals, accounting for 2.7 percent of Pennsylvania jobs. You could fill Beaver Stadium 15 times with the number of people purchasing Pennsylvania hunting and fishing licenses every year. Over 4 million people access Pennsylvania's rail trails annually for recreation and transportation, and the commonwealth welcomes 40 million visitors to the state parks (with about 25 percent coming from out of state). In the winter, Pennsylvania is home to over 5 percent of ski areas in the country. Conservation connectivity benefits humans, wildlife, and plants alike.

I would like to thank all the commonwealth agencies and independent commissions who provided us with information for this study, particularly DCNR and PennDOT, who also reviewed the draft of our report. Additionally, I would like to thank the countless stakeholders who provided us with insight into conservation connectivity from many different perspectives. Finally, I would like to thank LBFC staff analysts Morgan Smith and Josh Ballard, who assisted with this study. Madam Chair and members of the committee, at this time I would be happy to answer any questions you may have about the HR 87 study.