

# REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

## *A Study Pursuant to House Resolution 87: The Current Status of Conservation Connectivity in Pennsylvania*

Released: 06/12/2024

House Resolution 2023-87 directs the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee (LBFC) to study conservation corridors' status, management, and benefits. Conservation corridors connect or reconnect areas impacted by habitat fragmentation or disconnected "islands" of habitats. Highlights of our report include the following:

- ❖ **Pennsylvania is home to over 25,000 wildlife and plant species, 11 ecoregions, and 86,000 miles of streams and rivers.** Habitat fragmentation cuts off species from critical movement between areas. Conservation corridors can mean different things: (1) preserving existing natural corridors (rivers, mountain ranges), (2) designating areas as conservation zones or additions to existing protected land (federal, state, local parks), (3) preventing land from future development (easements).
- ❖ **At the commonwealth level, multiple state agencies and independent commissions are working on aspects of conservation connectivity.** There are also multiple partnerships between state agencies and commissions regarding conservation connectivity. For example, in December 2023, the Federal Highway Administration announced the award of grant funding for PennDOT and other commonwealth agencies to develop a wildlife crossing strategic plan.
- ❖ **PennDOT has constructed 35 wildlife crossings (underpasses) to make roadways safer for drivers and wildlife.** Wildlife crossings attempt to mitigate the impact of roadways intersecting habitats and prevent wildlife-vehicle collisions (WVC). In 2022, 4,533 deer-related and 217 other animal-related WVCs were reported to PennDOT (4.1 percent of all crash types reported to PennDOT). Of the WVCs reported to PennDOT, seven resulted in human fatalities.
- ❖ **State-owned land presents opportunities to connect adjoining habitats for conservation connectivity.** The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and the Game Commission manage 3.9 million acres of state-owned land.
- ❖ **The states surrounding Pennsylvania have implemented connectivity efforts that revolve around collaboration, data collection, and analysis.** Most conservation connectivity tools surrounding states use are similar to Pennsylvania's; however, we identified areas for improvement in the commonwealth. New Jersey, in particular, had a robust working group to foster collaboration and may serve as a model for Pennsylvania to implement.
- ❖ **In 2022, outdoor recreation's value added to Pennsylvania's gross domestic product was \$16.9 billion.**

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### For Executive Action:

1. The Governor should create a position to work among and between state agencies and independent commissions to direct conservation connectivity work in Pennsylvania.
2. The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation should add considerations for wildlife crossings in its long-term planning.
3. The Office of the Governor should convene an official interagency/commission conservation connectivity working group to build on existing collaborations (including federal and non-governmental partners).
4. An interagency/commission conservation connectivity working group should identify high-priority areas of conservation connectivity in Pennsylvania and establish common goals.

#### For Legislative Consideration:

5. The General Assembly should consider requiring a study by the LBFC after PennDOT implements the "Pennsylvania Wildlife Crossings Strategic Plan and Analytical Tools" to provide an update on where Pennsylvania is in implementing conservation connectivity procedures.
6. If the General Assembly deems expanding commonwealth-owned land a public policy priority in conservation connectivity, it should consider, at a minimum, an inflation adjustment to the Pennsylvania Game Commission's \$400 per acre land acquisition limit.
7. The General Assembly should consider requiring auto insurance carriers to track and provide state transportation agencies with annual data identifying wildlife-vehicle collision locations in Pennsylvania to identify hotspots.
8. The General Assembly should consider requiring commonwealth agencies, independent commissions, contractors, etc., who remove animal carcasses from roadways to centrally track the data, including coordinates where animal carcasses were removed, to aid in identifying wildlife-vehicle collision hotspots.
9. The General Assembly should consider funding to develop new and preserve existing conservation corridors if deemed a public policy priority.

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