

Pennsylvania's Old-Growth Forest System

As Designated by DCNR and The Nature Conservancy

In 2004, Daniel Devlin (now chief of DCNR state forests) and three employees of The Nature Conservancy published a seven-page article in the *Journal of Forestry* describing the establishment of a half-million-acre old-growth forest system within its 2.1-million-acre state forest. It stated, "*The proposed old-growth forest must be resurrected from fragmented and structurally homogeneous second-growth forests that are subject to anthropogenic disturbances.*" In other words, human activities such as hunting, energy development, camping, and access are intended to be minimized or eliminated. Most importantly to their plan, it requires the dramatic and permanent reduction of the deer population.

According to the publication, as of 2002 "*approximately 550,000 acres in the system will include: (1) making the projected core zones as large as possible; (2) making the sites as round as possible to minimize edge influences; (3) surrounding the core zones with buffer zones; (4) linking isolated core zones by biological corridors; and (5) ensuring that adjacent land uses to the buffers and core zones will not bring negative external influences*". As presented in a "typical" old-growth patch configuration (Figure 3 in the publication), buffer zones and corridors that link core zones range to 1-2 miles in width.

As of 2002, as presented in Figure 2 there were about 1,740,000 acres comprising all forest stands within the 2.1-million-acre Pennsylvania state forest system. Therefore, at 550,000 acres (and without additional buffer zones) old-growth forest areas represented 32% of all DCNR state forests in 2002. About 85% of state forest stands were in the 61-140 year-old age class. There were appreciably no older stands, except for about 20,000 acres of current old-growth stands in the 271-280 year-old age class, representing about 1% of total state forest stands. Only 2% were listed in the 0-10 year age class – the age class most valuable to deer, grouse, and many other wildlife species -- and DCNR's policy has been to fence these early-stage areas from access by deer and other big game mammals.

DCNR projects that by 2140 the old-growth system will have been increased from 32% coverage in 2002 to 55% of all state forest stands, or about 1,020,000 acres. The 1% in 2002 that were in the 271-280 year-old age class will then be 409-418 years old. Only 3% are designated for early-stage (0-10 year age class) forests as valuable wildlife habitat.

DCNR and The Nature Conservancy concluded their published design for a century's-old old-growth forest system by stating, "*Reducing Pennsylvania's deer population will likely require a long-term political process. This will not be easy. For more than a hundred years, the goal was to increase deer...*".

Discussion. DCNR's old-growth forest plan represents an extreme environmental agenda that will have a fundamental and permanent effect on forest and wildlife management, sport hunting, rural communities, and Pennsylvania's economy. About 55% of Pennsylvania's state forest stands are designated for inclusion in an old-growth forest system that will continue to grow for centuries. According to DCNR and The Nature Conservancy, the plan includes the dramatic and permanent reduction of the deer population, and the complete or near elimination of anthropogenic (human-related) disturbances. This process has already begun, when from 2001-06 the Game Commission complied with DCNR's request by killing 2,500,000 deer from a pre-reduction population of 1,500,000 deer – killing an extra 100,000 pregnant does and fawns over the normal, average hunter harvest in each of the five years. The Commission so overshot the population that it prompted commissioners to state in private that they had "*overshot the herd to only 1-2 deer per square mile in some regions;*" and cause a member of the Commission's deer team to brag, "*We've literally exterminated deer in some areas.*"

Since 2006, DCNR and the Game Commission have maintained this excessive pressure on the herd using high annual antlerless hunting-license allocations and high numbers of additional DMAP hunting permits for DCNR.

While the old-growth-forest design of DCNR and The Nature Conservancy might seem innocuous to some, in reality the frog has already been placed in the rapidly warming pot of water. It will spell the end of sport hunting as we know it, and create a state forest system that favors an extreme environmental agenda over sport hunting, family businesses and the outdoor industry, the well-being of rural communities, family cabins and hunting camps, and energy development.

In January 2017, the Pennsylvania Legislative Budget and Finance Committee calculated that as of 2011 the DCNR/PGC plan was impacting rural communities and the state's economy by a minimum of \$501.6 million per year, and causing an annual loss of \$40 million in tax revenue. Considering that the economic impact was calculated to be a half-billion-dollars per year after only a decade into the centuries-long plan, one can only imagine the great and lasting socioeconomic impacts that are in store for the Commonwealth if this plan continues for hundreds of years.

Rep. Dave Maloney's wildlife habitat bill represents a solution to this enormous and growing crisis. It is vital that Legislators pass this bill.

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