

Strategic Action Plan

Priority Water: Laurel Highlands

Five-year Vision Statement: Over the next five years, the Laurel Highlands Priority Water will remain as an extremely unique geography that contains strongholds for wild trout. Preservation and protection of headwater streams will allow for wild trout to be persistent long into the future. Degraded headwater streams in the Laurel Highlands will be improved and education and public relations will lead to appreciation and stewardship by all who use the area for recreation and business.

Five-year Conservation Goals

1. Educate the public and advocate for coldwater conservation while promoting great work that is being done to benefit all users of the resource as well as downstream communities.
2. Maintain and improve in-stream habitat with a focus on reducing sedimentation and habitat degradation.
3. Reconnect streams to allow for aquatic organism passage (AOP), specifically for wild trout, and improved flood resilience.
4. Reduce the impacts associated with acidification from Abandoned Mine Drainage (AMD) and episodic acidification from rain and snowmelt to coldwater resources within the watershed.
5. Increase the current level of monitoring for environmental and land use changes (fisheries populations and water quality). Inventory efforts to identify areas where site specific best management practices will improve degraded streams and increase habitat allowing for upgraded levels of regulatory protection.
6. Preserve and protect coldwater resources, and special protection (high quality and exceptional value) streams from land development including development for growing energy needs and associated infrastructure.

Primary Conservation Strategies

1. Engage with legislators, local officials, conservation partners, and downstream stakeholders to develop, advocate, and implement outreach regarding coldwater conservation and the benefits to the local community. All available media types will be used to increase communication among diverse audiences.
2. Implement best management practices to stabilize eroding streambanks and improve/restore native riparian habitat such as eastern hemlock, white pine, rhododendron, and mountain laurel. Improve habitat by mimicking natural conditions with woody debris and instream habitat structures. Utilize the Dirt, Gravel, and Low Volume Road Program to reduce stream impacts from roads. Work with DCNR and appropriate partners to restrict ATV access and educate ATV riders about actions that impact headwater streams.
3. Replace inadequate stream crossings, remove dams that are barriers to aquatic organism passage, and restore stream sections impacted by problems associated with barriers. Implement projects that will provide AOP for all life stages of wild trout and accommodate flooding. Prioritize and ensure connectivity to streams that are breeding waters for wild trout. Educate owners of stream crossings about the benefits of flood resiliency, public safety, and economic benefits of AOP improvements.

4. Strategically locate new remediation projects and operate and maintain current remediation infrastructure that addresses acidification including AMD.
5. Collaborative advocacy for stream designation upgrades and maintenance of special protection designations, review and recommend hatchery trout stocking allocation changes, and assess and monitor streams through partnerships with conservation districts, universities and other stakeholders.
6. Foster and maintain relationships with decisionmakers and public land management agencies to communicate the importance of preserving and protecting the unique coldwater resources of the Laurel Highlands.

Current Partners

- Conservation Districts in the southwest region of PA: Allegheny, Blair, Bedford, Cambria, Greene, Fayette, Indiana, Somerset, Washington and Westmoreland.
- Mountain Watershed Association
- Youghiogheny River Keeper
- Western PA Conservancy
- Local Universities: Saint Vincent College, University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, Penn West California, St. Francis University
- Powdermill Nature Preserve
- Conemaugh Valley Conservancy
- Stonycreek/Conemaugh River Improvement Project
- Loyalhanna Watershed Association
- Western PA Coalition for Abandoned Mine Reclamation
- Bottomlands Conservancy
- Foundation for PA Watersheds
- Trout Unlimited National
- PA Council of Trout Unlimited
- Trout Unlimited Chapters in the Southwest PA Region
- Print and social media platforms

Potential Partners and Affected Communities

- Casselman River Watershed Association
- Wells Creek Watershed Association
- Shade Creek Watershed Association
- PA Game Commission
- PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
- PA Fish and Boat Commission
- Youghiogheny Dam
- Jacobs Creek Watershed Association
- US Army Corps of Engineers
- American Rivers
- National Park Conservation Association

- Southern Laurel Highlands Plant and Pest Management Partnership
- PA Environmental Council
- Go Laurel Highlands
- Local Sportsman's Clubs

Decisionmakers

- PA Fish and Boat Commission
- National Park Service
- PA Department of Environmental Protection
- PA Game Commission
- County Planning Departments
- Conservation Districts
- US Fish and Wildlife Service
- Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement
- US Army Corps of Engineers-Pittsburgh Division
- PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources