

Natural Gas Development, Public Access and Recreation

Balancing Uses of State Forest Lands

Factsheet



Visit our website

DCNR maintains a comprehensive website about natural gas development on state forest lands. Visit www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry and click on “Natural Gas Drilling on State Forests.”

The website also hosts information about major trail closures and a variety of public use and recreational maps. Click on “News and Advisories” or “Find a Forest” for more information.

Use of State Forests

The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) Bureau of Forestry manages Pennsylvania’s 2.2 million-acre state forest system for a variety of uses and values. Among them are scenic beauty, recreational opportunities and the environmentally sensitive extraction of mineral resources.

Natural gas extraction is currently taking place on approximately 700,000 acres of state forest. In recent years there has been a marked increase in activity related to the Marcellus Shale natural gas deposit that underlies much of Pennsylvania.

DCNR seeks to limit the impacts of natural gas development on other state forest uses and values. Conflicts, however, are unavoidable. The intent of this fact sheet is to provide state forest visitors with the necessary information for a safe and enjoyable experience when visiting areas near natural gas development activities.

Preserving the Experience

Part of DCNR’s mission in managing the state forest is to maintain its wild character. The agency’s policy is to not allow drilling and surface disturbance in designated Wild and Natural areas.

To limit disturbance to the forest in areas where natural gas development occurs, well pad locations are chosen to maximize the use of existing roads, pipelines and previously disturbed areas.

DCNR also works to limit impacts to important scenic vistas, trails, back-country areas, unique geologic features and important recreation areas.

DCNR imposes a 600-foot buffer on wild and natural areas and 300 feet on picnic areas and high-quality and exceptional-value streams and water bodies. Natural gas development is likewise not allowed within 100 feet of designated State Forest Hiking Trails.

National Scenic Trails, such as the Appalachian Trail, are subject to a 200-foot buffer.

State Forest Road Impacts

Some state forest roads may be temporarily closed during drilling operations or other peak periods of heavy use to reduce potential safety hazards. Drilling operations at any given site can last up to six months. When drilling is complete, any closed roads will be reopened.

On state forest roads near drilling sites, visitors may notice increased truck traffic. Drilling operators use trucks to haul water and equipment and can present a hazard for other motorists on rather narrow state forest roads. Generally, state forest visitors will find the most natural gas-related traffic between April and November.

Reducing Trucking Impacts

To avoid potential conflicts on state forest roads during times of high public use, DCNR will attempt to limit or restrict truck traffic during the following times: Opening weekend of trout season; opening weekend of youth spring gobbler season; opening weekend of regular spring gobbler season; Memorial Day weekend; Fourth of July holiday or weekend; Labor Day weekend; opening day of fall archery season; opening day of youth/special use hunting; opening day of early muzzleloader season; opening day of general small game season; regular bear season; regular firearms deer season; as well as for scheduled special activities and events on state forest or adjacent state park lands.

Trail Impacts

The state forest system contains an extensive trail and road system. This system provides recreation for many activities, including hiking, cross-country skiing, horseback riding, and

scenic driving. The state forest also hosts an extensive snowmobile trail system and 11 designated ATV trails.

Forest managers will work to minimize impacts to the state forest road and trail systems from natural gas development. However, some conflicts and impacts are unavoidable.

In cases where drilling operations disrupt the integrity of roads and trails, forest managers will seek to establish alternate routes and options. To ensure public safety, forest managers may need to remove or modify certain portions of a road or trail network. Some changes may only be temporary.

In some instances, natural gas development can help create additional miles of trails and help minimize conflicts. Co-locating parts of certain snowmobile trails on pipelines is just one example.

Noise Pollution

The undeveloped character so many have come to expect from state forests offers peace, solitude and a feeling of remoteness for many visitors. Ambient noise can dramatically affect a user's recreational experience.

Many noise sources related to natural gas development are temporary. Truck traffic peaks during fracing operations that require the transport of large amounts of water. Likewise, noise generated during drilling ceases once the wells are complete.

Compressor stations – large building-like structures that increase the pressure of natural gas for distribution to pipelines – are another matter. They produce continuous noise that can impact the back-country experience for many state forest visitors.

DCNR forest managers are working with gas operators to strategically place these stations to avoid excessive noise and developing construction guidelines that dampen noise emissions. As much as possible, DCNR aims to preserve the remote nature of our state forest system and the backcountry experiences sought by many visitors.

Restricted Areas

Active natural gas drilling sites are essentially industrial construction zones incompatible with public access. While drilling is taking place, the immediate 5-acre well pad is closed to the public. Gas operators may post signs to restrict access to dangerous structures or equipment. Please obey these signs and avoid posted dangers.

Some companies post security guards at the entrance to active drilling sites. People visiting these areas should check in with the guard and follow their instructions. DCNR works with these companies to ensure public safety.

Safety Zones

Hunting, like any other recreational activity, is allowed in the areas surrounding well pads and other drilling infrastructure. While well pads are active, many workers live in temporary buildings. Therefore, hunters must observe Game Commission safety zone regulations by not hunting within 150 yards from any occupied residence, camp, industrial or commercial building.

A Right to Access

While some areas are restricted to the public, state forest visitors have the right to access land surrounding active drilling sites. The state forest system is publically owned. As long as visitors follow posted signs, stay off the established well pads and associated areas, visitors are allowed to observe, photograph and recreate in the surrounding forest.

Contact DCNR

The state forest system is there for the public to use and enjoy. DCNR encourages visitors to contact the department if they see something unsafe or have further questions about recreational opportunities.

Before any trip, it's a good idea to call ahead for the most up-to-date information. Visit DCNR's website or call the phone numbers listed on this factsheet.



For more information

For more information, contact DCNR Bureau of Forestry at:

(717) 787-2703
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www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry

