

Changes in the Management of Francis E. Walter Dam
Comments for the Public Meeting February 24, 2005
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Good evening. On behalf of the board of directors of Wildlands Conservancy and its president Tom Kerr, I would like to welcome you to this public meeting to discuss changes in the management of Francis E. Walter Dam. My name is Chris Kocher. I am the chief program officer and director of the river program for Wildlands Conservancy.

Wildlands Conservancy's mission is to preserve, protect, and enhance the land, water, ecological, and recreational resources of the Lehigh River watershed. The Conservancy fulfills its vision and mission through involvement with many partners in proactive education and advocacy programs, various land-protection and stewardship strategies, science-informed water-quality and ecological restoration projects, comprehensive community-planning efforts, and greenway and recreational-trail development. Because of this interest and involvement, it is my distinct pleasure and honor to facilitate this important public workshop.

Tonight we are here to discuss changes in the management of Francis E. Walter Dam. In order to accomplish this task, we have laid out an informative agenda. To begin, I will talk about this wonderful resource that is near and dear to all of us. We will hear from a state lawmaker who has demonstrated a longstanding support for the river. In addition, we will hear information presented by the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers and its partner organizations Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission, and the Delaware River Basin Commission.

After these presentations, we will have the opportunity to ask questions of the agencies in a one-on-one workshop format. In addition, you will have the opportunity to submit written comments on the changes through a new website designed specifically to receive public comment, and have the opportunity to interact with agencies during additional public forums.

This public forum tonight marks a significant milestone in the management of the Lehigh River. Whether you or the organization you represent agree or disagree with the information presented this evening, I think one thing we can all agree on, this is an appropriate first step – one that will lead to changes in the management of the reservoir, the collection of scientific information to determine the impacts of the changes, and open the door to include all the stakeholders in decisions in the dam's future management.

The Lehigh River has been used and enjoyed by countless generations. From the first Native Americans who settled upon its banks, to the developers of the canals, locks, and dams which harnessed the power of the river, to the many industrialists who brought us iron, cement, and steel, to the many recreational users, to the resident wildlife – all of whom did – or do – depend on this important resource. The Lehigh River is part of our

lives, part of our community. Over the span of years, this great resource has served us well.

The Lehigh River watershed drains 1,345 square miles of eastern Pennsylvania, encompasses portions of 108 municipalities, contains more than 2,006 miles of tributary streams, and drains portions of ten counties. The watershed is home to more than 550,000 people. The headwaters of the Lehigh River are located deep in the Pocono plateau at Lehigh Marshes just north of Gouldsboro in Wayne County. From there, the Lehigh River winds its way 103 miles to its confluence with the Delaware River in the city of Easton in Northampton County. The river is the second largest tributary to the Delaware River.

The reach of the Lehigh River encompassing the Francis E. Walter Dam to Jim Thorpe has been designated a Pennsylvania State Scenic River. This 32-mile section includes the Lehigh Gorge State Park, which is one of the most popular Class II and Class III whitewater-boating sections in the country. The river itself is an evolving resource teaming with sport-fishing opportunities. These attractions provide annual economic benefits to the state and local economy, and offer recreational opportunities to tens of thousands of people each year. The Lehigh River is also used as a raw water supply for hundreds of thousands of watershed residents in four large communities.

The river has historically functioned as a transportation route to markets in Philadelphia, New York, and elsewhere, for the coal from the Eastern Middle and Southern coalfields of Carbon and Luzerne counties. America's Industrial Revolution was cradled in the valley of the Lehigh River, which by the way, is the only river in America to be privately owned. From 1827 to 1966 it was owned by the Lehigh Coal & Navigation Company. Since then, it has largely emerged from its industrial past to return to its natural beauty. Now, along the banks of the river, bikers and walkers are seen where there were once mules and canal boats hauling coal and other material to fuel the Industrial Revolution. Where dams once contained the mighty Lehigh, fishermen in great numbers are seen reaping the harvest of a more-healthy stream.

Since the passage of the Clean Water acts in the early 1970s, the water quality of the Lehigh River has dramatically improved, which has led to an increased sense of stewardship for the resource. The Lehigh River is not the river of our ancestors. No longer can the Lehigh be described as "black flowing lava" which it was in the depths of its environmental degradation.

Currently, the Lehigh River watershed contains 110,000 acres of publicly owned or protected lands, portions of five state parks, all or portions of 14 state gamelands, and 108 Natural Area Inventory sites. Over 33 fish species have been documented in the river and its tributaries. American shad have returned to their ancestral spawning grounds and trout again call the Lehigh home. The watershed is alive with over 32 reptile and amphibian species, 60 different types of mammals and several species of special concern including bog turtle, osprey, bald eagle, and American bittern.

However, today the river still faces many challenges. Rapid growth (known as “suburban sprawl”), non-point source pollution, loss of critical wildlife habitat, loss of open space, loss of productive farmland, and abandoned mine drainage all affect the watershed adversely.

Many of you in this room are meeting these challenges tonight. Through our collective efforts, working in partnership, we have worked and will continue to work to improve this great resource. Whether it is through cleaning up mine drainage, promoting “smart-growth,” protecting critical open-space, providing effective fish passage, providing recreational opportunities to experience the river, or effectively managing its water resources, we are all dedicated to its improvement.

Most recently, through the work of Wildlands Conservancy and its many partners (many of whom are in attendance tonight), the Lehigh River has been placed on the *Pennsylvania Rivers Conservation Registry*, a fitting acknowledgement of the river’s value, and making it eligible to receive additional state funding to aid in its remediation and enhancement.

I have lived within one mile of the Lehigh River my entire life. For the last 10 years, I have had the privilege to focus on the river’s protection in my career. I, like most of you, feel a sense of ownership and stewardship of this great river. I am proud of our collective work and am aware that much more needs to be done. While the river may never again be labeled “pristine,” it can be returned to its former glory as the life-blood of our communities.

So this evening, listen to the information being presented, draw your own conclusions, ask hard questions of the agencies’ representatives, provide written comment to the Army Corp, and become involved in the ongoing public input process which commences this evening.

Thank you for your interest and commitment to the Lehigh River. As always, I look forward to working with you and your organization on the preservation, protection, and enhancement of the Lehigh River and its watershed.