

Welcome Remarks for the Rededication of the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail

Tom Saunders – Western Pennsylvania Conservancy

Hi. I'm Tom Saunders, president and CEO of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy.

It's wonderful to be able to celebrate the rededication of the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail with all our good partners in this project.

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy has a long history of working on the protection and development of this trail.

The Conservancy began land protection work in the Laurel Highlands in the early 1950s.

During the 1960s, the Conservancy acquired and protected over 50 properties adding up to more than 11,000 acres that were to become Laurel Ridge State Park and the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail.

In the late 1960s, we conveyed the land to the state for the state park.

The Conservancy continued to play a role in trail planning, including organizing volunteers in the 1970s to explore the best locations for the trail segments, and fundraising efforts, as the state then continued with the trail planning, and up until the trail opened in 1976.

Today, thousands of hikers use this trail each year and it is one of the most special hiking destinations in the region. I've hiked the length of it and know firsthand what a great trail it is.

The Conservancy continues to work on land protection in the Laurel Highlands, and have protected more than 80,000 acres of open space in the Laurel Highlands, most of it turned over to the state to manage.

We appreciate the work of the Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation, DCNR and all our other partners involved with this trail. The restoration of the shelters is wonderful to see, and we always appreciate DCNR's great management of the trail.

Thank you.

Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail Background

- More than 80,000 hikers use the 70.5-mile Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail annually.
- Connects over 100,000 acres of public land along the spine of Laurel Ridge.
- The trail stretches through Laurel Ridge State Park, Ohiopyle State Park, two state game lands, Seven Springs Mountain Resort, Johnstown Water Authority land and Forbes State Forest.
- WPC originally protected 56 properties totaling more than 11,000 acres in 1965 to establish Laurel Ridge State Park and the creation of the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail.
- In 1968, WPC conveyed the Laurel Ridge properties to the state.

- WPC was still involved in trail planning after conveying the land by organizing a group of hikers to conduct early scouting work to create the location. Once funding for the trail was established, construction and maintenance was taken over by park staff.
- The final trail was planned by park staff in 1970 and was completed by the fall of 1976.
- In its first year of use, 75,000 hikers used the trail.
- Today, the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail is managed by DCNR staff working at Laurel Ridge State Park.

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