

Pennsylvania Energy Impacts Assessment

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Marcellus Shale Natural Gas and Wind Energy

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Executive Summary



Forest landscape along the West Branch Susquehanna River, Clinton County. © George C. Gress / TNC

Within a few weeks during the summer of 2000, eight towers rose two hundred feet above an agricultural field on a low ridge top along the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Not long after, large blades began sweeping the Somerset County sky as Pennsylvania's first industrial wind facility went on line. Several years later and an hour drive to the west, an unusual natural gas well was drilled over a mile down and pumped full of water. That well in Washington County yielded a surprising amount of gas flowing from fractures in a shale formation that geologists had long suspected held plenty of gas but has been too expensive to develop. Meanwhile, a Canadian company bought a small sawmill in Mifflintown and started producing wood pellets for

stoves, boilers, and electric plants. It soon became one of the region's largest producers of wood biomass energy supplies. In the decade since, these three new energy technologies have expanded rapidly across the state. By the end of this year, 500 wind turbines will be turning on Pennsylvania ridgelines, nearly 1,800 Marcellus natural gas wells will be scattered across rolling fields and forests, and over 50 facilities will be producing wood pellets or burning wood for energy. Thousands of miles of pipelines and powerlines already crisscross the state to get energy supplies to major markets in the Northeast.

Each of these energy sources carries both promise and risk for people and nature. The promise is that wind, natural gas, and wood biomass energy can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, generate jobs, and increase energy security. The risk is that extensive land use change and loss of natural habitats could accompany new energy development and transmission lines. Impacts to priority conservation habitats across the state have been modest thus far. For example, aerial photo analysis indicates Marcellus gas development has so far cleared just 3,500 acres of forest (about 1,000 acres for wind turbines). An additional 8,500 acres of forest is now within 300 feet of new fragmenting edges created by well pads, and associated roads and



Black-throated blue warblers and other interior forest species could be impacted by forest fragmentation caused by energy development. © Gary Irwin

infrastructure (5,000 acres for wind turbines). This fragmentation deprives “interior” forest species, such as black-throated blue warblers, northern goshawks, salamanders, and many woodland flowers, of the shade, humidity and tree canopy protection that only deep forest environments can provide.

By all accounts, each of these energy types is likely to grow substantially in Pennsylvania during the next two decades. The Marcellus shale formation, which underlies two-thirds of the state, is now believed to be one of the largest unconventional shale gas reserves in the world. The Pennsylvania Alternative Energy Portfolio Standards Act of 2004, along with state and federal incentives, will likely boost expansion of wind, wood biomass, and other alternative energy types over the next two decades. But, how much of each energy type might be developed? What transmission infrastructure will be needed to get more electric power and natural gas to consumers? And, where are these energy types most likely to be developed? How does the likely scale and location of future energy development overlap with priority conservation areas? The Pennsylvania Energy Impacts Assessment seeks answers to these questions so that conservationists can work more effectively with energy companies and government agencies to avoid, minimize or mitigate habitat impacts in the future.



Nine Mile Run Creek in PA's North Central Highlands
© George C. Gress / TNC.

Assessment Goal: Develop credible energy development projections and assess how they might affect high priority conservation areas across Pennsylvania. Marcellus natural gas, wind, wood biomass, and associated electric and gas transmission lines were chosen as the focus since these energy types have the most potential to cause land-use change in the state over the next two decades. The conservation impacts focus is on forest, freshwater, and rare species habitats. The assessment **does not** address other potential environmental impacts, including water withdrawal, water quality, air quality and migratory pathways for birds and bats. The assessment also does not address a range of other social, economic, and climate characteristics of these energy types.

Key Assumptions: Any assessment of future trends must include certain assumptions. Among the most important assumptions of the Pennsylvania Energy Impacts Assessment are the following:

- A 20-year time period is used to assess potential cumulative habitat impacts from energy development;
- Given uncertainties about how energy prices could change, it was assumed that prices and capital investment (and policy and social conditions) will be sufficient to promote steady development growth for each energy type during the next two decades;
- Given uncertainty about how technology changes could affect spatial footprints, it was assumed that spatial footprints per well pad, turbine, and mile of transmission line will not change significantly during the next two decades;
- Given the proprietary nature of data on leases, Marcellus Shale porosity, fine resolution wind power, etc., all projections are based on publicly available information;

- It was assumed that recent trends and patterns of energy development will continue for the next two decades absent significant changes in government policies and industry practices;

Energy projections contained in this assessment are informed scenarios – **not predictions** – for how much energy development might take place and where it is more and less probable. Projected impacts, however, are based on measurements of actual spatial footprints measured for hundreds of well pads and wind turbines.

Analytical Steps: Key analytical steps for the Pennsylvania Energy Assessment included:

- 1) *Data collection* – Over 50 spatial data layers on energy resources, development permits, road and transmission infrastructure, physical features, and conservation priorities were compiled for the assessment;
- 2) *Spatial footprint analysis* – Spatial footprints for Marcellus gas well and wind turbine pads, associated roads, associated pipelines, associated electric transmission lines, and associated other clearings (e.g., gas containment pits, equipment staging areas, electrical substations) were digitized using aerial photos of sites before and after construction;
- 3) *Scale projections* – Low, medium, and high scenarios for **how much** Marcellus Shale natural gas, wind, wood biomass, and transmission line development might occur were based as much as possible on existing projections and data from credible sources.
- 4) *Geographic projections* – Projections of **where** new Marcellus natural gas and wind energy development is more and less likely to occur were based on modeling the probability of a map pixel's land-use change to energy production based on sets of drivers and constraints developed for each energy type. Geographic projections for wood biomass and energy transmission were not modeled due to a lack of data. Conclusions about regional patterns of wood biomass and transmission development and potential conservation impacts will be presented in Report 2 of the Pennsylvania Energy Impacts Assessment.
- 5) *Conservation impacts analysis* – The potential impacts of future energy development were assessed for forest and freshwater habitats across the state. In addition, sites recognized as important for species of conservation concern were assessed. Conservation datasets for these assessments included, among others, large forest patches from The Nature Conservancy and the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, habitat areas for rare species from the Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program, densities for interior forest nesting bird species from the 2nd Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas, and intact watersheds for native brook trout populations from the Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture.
- 6) *Review* – A dozen energy experts in government, industry, and research organizations provided technical review of the energy projections.

Energy Projections: The Pennsylvania Energy Impacts Assessment developed low, medium and high scenarios for the amount of energy development that might take place in Pennsylvania by 2030. The projections include:

- *Marcellus Shale* – Sixty thousand wells could be drilled on between 6,000 and 15,000 new well pads (there are currently about 1,000), depending on how many wells are placed on each pad. Gas development will occur in at least half of the state's counties, with the densest development likely in 15 counties in southwest, north central, and northeast Pennsylvania.
- *Wind* – Between 750 and 2,900 additional wind turbines could be built (there are currently about 500), depending on the wind share of electric generation by 2030. Most turbines would be built along the

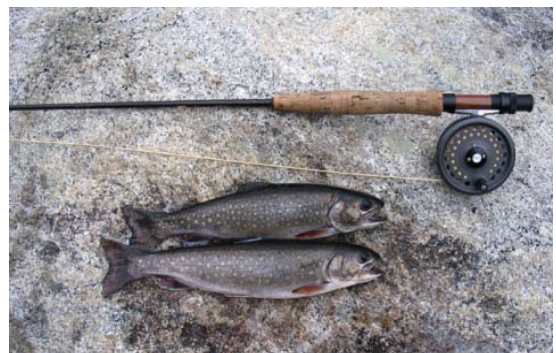
Allegheny Front in western Pennsylvania and on high Appalachian ridgetops in the central and northeastern parts of the state.

- *Wood Biomass* – Wood biomass energy demand could double or even triple today's wood energy use, depending on whether and how many coal power plants co-fire with wood biomass. Wood biomass energy development is likely to be widespread across the state in all three scenarios.
- *Transmission Lines* – Preliminary findings indicate between 10,000 and 15,000 miles of new high-voltage power lines and gas pipelines (especially gathering lines) could be built during the next twenty years. There is considerable uncertainty about exactly where these lines will be built but recently proposed electric and gas transmission lines provide insights into potential habitat impacts.

Conservation Impacts: This first Pennsylvania Energy Impacts Assessment report focuses on the overlap between likely Marcellus gas and wind development areas and Pennsylvania's most important natural habitats. A second report will focus on the potential for additional impacts from new wood biomass energy plants, electric power lines, and natural gas pipelines. Key findings for impacts from Marcellus natural gas and for wind development include:

Forests. By 2030, a range of between 34,000 to 82,000 acres of forest cover could be cleared by new Marcellus gas development in the state. Forest clearing for the wind development scenarios is much smaller, ranging from 1,000 to 4,500 acres. Such clearings would create new forest edges where the risk of predation, changes in light and humidity levels, and expanded presence of invasive species could threaten forest interior species in 85,000 to 190,000 forest acres adjacent to Marcellus development and 5,400 to 27,000 forest acres adjacent to wind development. Forest impacts will be concentrated in the north central and southwest parts of the state where many of the state's largest and most intact forest patches could be fragmented into smaller patches by well pads, roads, and other infrastructure. Impacts to forest interior species will vary depending on their geographic distribution and density. Some species, such as the black-throated blue warbler, could see widespread impacts to their relatively restricted breeding habitats in the state while widely distributed species, such as the Scarlet Tanager, would be relatively less affected. Locating energy infrastructure in open areas or toward the outer edges of large patches can significantly reduce impacts to important forest areas.

Freshwater. Aquatic habitats are at risk too. Once widespread, healthy populations of native eastern brook trout in Pennsylvania are now largely confined to small mountain watersheds. Nearly 80 percent of the state's most intact brook trout watersheds could see at least some Marcellus gas and wind development during the next twenty years. Strongholds for brook trout are concentrated in north central Pennsylvania, where Marcellus development is projected to be relatively intensive in over half of the state's best brook trout watersheds. Exceptional Value streams – the Department of Environmental Protection's highest quality designation – could see hundreds of well pads (perhaps 300 - 750) and dozens of wind turbines (perhaps 50 – 200) located within one-half mile under the projections. Because many intact brook trout and EV



Brook trout © TNC

streams are in steep terrain, rigorous sediment controls, and possibly additional setback measures, are needed to help conserve these sensitive habitats.

Rare Species. Nearly 40 percent of Pennsylvania's globally rare and Pennsylvania threatened species can be found in areas with high potential for Marcellus gas development. These species tend to be associated with riparian areas, streams, and wetlands, while others are concentrated in unusually diverse areas such as the Youghiogheny Gorge. A handful of rare species have most or all of their known locations in high potential areas for Marcellus gas development. For example, three-fourths of all known snow trillium populations are in high potential Marcellus development areas as are all known populations for the green salamander. A much smaller number of known locations for globally and state rare species overlap with high potential wind development sites and they tend to be associated with rocky outcrops and ridgetop barrens habitats. Species with the greatest overlaps include timber rattlesnakes, Allegheny woodrats, and northern long-eared Myotis bats. More intensive surveys for globally rare and state critically endangered species in high potential Marcellus and wind development areas could help to minimize impacts before development begins. The Pennsylvania Game Commission is working with wind companies and other researchers to assess impacts to migratory pathways for birds and bats.

Recreation. Extensive overlaps are projected between Marcellus development and state forests, state parks, and state game lands. Just over ten percent of Pennsylvania's public lands are legally protected from gas development, most of it within State Wild and Natural Areas or in state parks where the Commonwealth owns the mineral rights. The state does not own mineral rights for 80% of State Park and State Game Lands, nearly 700,000 acres of State Forests have already been leased, and only about 300,000 acres of the remaining State Forest Lands are legally off-limits to future leases. Projections indicate between 900 and 2,200 well pads could be developed across all state lands, with most going on State Forest Lands, followed by State Game Lands, and State Parks. Wind development was not projected on state lands, though some facilities are projected near highly visited sites, including natural vistas.

Clearly, the heart of some of Pennsylvania's best natural habitats lie directly in the path of future energy development. Integrating information on conservation priorities into energy planning, operations, and policy by energy companies and government agencies sooner rather than later could dramatically reduce these impacts. Many factors – including energy prices, economic benefits, greenhouse gas reductions, and energy independence – will go into final decisions about where and how to proceed with energy development. Information about Pennsylvania's most important natural habitats should be an important part of the calculus about trade-offs and optimization as energy development proceeds. Would Pennsylvania's conservation pioneers, including Gifford Pinchot, Maurice Goddard, and Rachel Carson, expect anything less?

