



American Rivers

Thriving By Nature

America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2009

7 Laurel Hill Creek Pennsylvania

Threat: Excessive water withdrawals

SUMMARY

Laurel Hill Creek is a Pennsylvania treasure that brings valuable recreation and tourism dollars to local communities. But the creek lacks safeguards to protect it from excessive water withdrawals for development and energy extraction. Unless water planners heed the sound water management advice in Pennsylvania's new State Water Plan, water withdrawals could irreparably harm the clean water, fish and wildlife, and recreation here and downstream on the popular Youghiogheny River.

THE RIVER

Located in Pennsylvania's Somerset County, Laurel Hill Creek flows 38 miles to the aptly-named town of Confluence where it joins the Casselman River and then the Youghiogheny River upstream of Ohiopyle State Park. Laurel Hill Creek flows through three state parks, Forbes State Forest, and small private holdings. The watershed is home to 3,700 residents who value the creek's clean water and fish and wildlife, which are unscathed by the abandoned mine drainage that plagues most southwestern Pennsylvania streams.

The creek is popular for fishing, swimming and kayaking, and is a source of drinking water for some of the 6,398 residents in the Borough of Somerset and two major ski resorts. Waters from the creek flow into the Youghiogheny River, which boasts outstanding Class III and IV whitewater rapids popular with kayakers, canoeists and rafters. Laurel Hill Creek is part of the Laurel Highlands, a mountainous region and tourism hotspot in Pennsylvania's Allegheny Mountains. The Laurel Highlands host more than three million visitors annually and generated more than \$780 million in visitor spending in 2003.

Laurel Hill Creek is a designated high quality cold water fishery that sustains natural populations of native brook trout and hellbender. Four tributaries to Laurel Hill Creek are designated exceptional value streams, and the watershed is home to ten "biological

diversity areas” containing globally rare plant species such as the Appalachian blue violet.

THE THREAT

Laurel Hill Creek is already suffering from excessive water withdrawals. Summer stream flows in Laurel Hill Creek have decreased steadily over the past decades. In several recent summers, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission was forced to relocate stocked trout due to excessively high water temperatures associated with low flows. As part of the Ohio River basin, the creek lacks the regulatory framework that allocates withdrawals in Pennsylvania’s other major watersheds: the Susquehanna and Delaware. An extensive study identified Laurel Hill Creek eligible as a Critical Water Planning Area (CWPA), a state designation acknowledging that water withdrawals impair the long-term use and quality of the creek, threaten human health, or impact beneficial uses. Unfortunately, this designation lacks protective enforcement.

Without adequate planning and safeguards, withdrawals will continue to exceed the creek’s reasonable capacity. The largest user, Somerset Municipal Authority, will continue supplying water outside of the Laurel Hill Creek watershed to the Borough of Somerset and two state prisons despite available water supplies from the Borough’s own watershed.

Development pressures are growing. Two major ski resorts that use the creek to supply water to hotels, condominiums and snowmaking systems plan to expand. Plans exist for construction of 1200 condominiums, two golf courses, and development at one of the resorts. A proposed water bottling facility could withdraw up to 108,000 gallons per day.

Energy projects also jeopardize the creek’s water supplies. “Intent to explore” applications have been submitted for coal mining in the watershed. The state of Pennsylvania has received thousands of proposals for new wells to extract methane from the Marcellus Shale Formation (MSF), a giant natural gas seam located beneath much of Appalachia. Tapping into each well will require between three and eight million gallons of water, which is pressure-injected five- to seven thousand feet underground in a process known as “hydrofracing,” in order to unearth the gas. These withdrawals could limit river flows or even entirely dry up small streams. Water used in hydrofracing is mixed with a veritable cocktail of chemicals and some existing wastewater treatment facilities are taking on wastewater from the mines without permits or even proper analysis of the potentially dangerous mixture. The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is currently considering a permit application that would allow water withdrawal from Laurel Hill Creek for these wells

Each of these projects would degrade Laurel Hill Creek and its ability to provide a long-term sustainable supply of clean water, and to generate recreation and tourism dollars in the region.

Climate change will intensify water supply concerns in Laurel Hill Creek. Scientists predict altered seasonal stream flows and warmer water temperatures in mountainous

areas of Pennsylvania like the Laurel Highlands. Additionally, rain and snowfall are predicted to decrease, forcing ski resorts to rely more heavily on groundwater that now sustains the creek. These changes could degrade the recreational value local communities depend on, compromise watershed health and devastate the creek's native brook trout populations.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

At the end of 2008, the Pennsylvania DEP approved a promising State Water Plan as the culmination of five years of research to address water supply and water quality concerns. The Plan establishes guiding principles for water planners, including collection and utilization of water monitoring data, integration of water resource management activities, and support of water conservation measures. The DEP must secure the CWPA designation for Laurel Hill Creek as a solid starting point from which to advocate for sound planning, management and protection. Water resource managers and planners should encourage those withdrawing water from Laurel Hill Creek for development, mining, gas extraction and other activities to adhere to the Plan's principles so as to preserve flows beneficial to the creek and local communities. Where it has authority, the DEP must set minimum flow criteria for CWPAs that will protect the designated uses and intrinsic values recognized by the State Water Plan for the benefit of each and as a model for all state streams.

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