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LEHIGH RIVER

THREAT: Poorly planned development

STATE: Pennsylvania

AT RISK: Clean water, fish and wildlife habitat, rural and local communities, open space

SUMMARY

The Lehigh River, flowing out of the Appalachian Mountains and through the densely populated Lehigh Valley region, is the “backyard river” for half a million people, and the keystone to Northeastern Pennsylvania’s outdoor recreation industry. The areas that surround the river offer outdoor gathering spaces and accessible recreation opportunities for people throughout the watershed, but especially in the cities of Allentown, Easton, and Bethlehem. But as the region becomes the logistics hub of the eastern seaboard, with over four square miles of warehouses and distribution centers built to date, the river’s health is at risk. Unless federal, state and local decision makers act to improve protections for local waterways, the area’s clean water and wildlife habitat could suffer irreversible harm.

THE RIVER

From its headwaters in the boreal forests of the Pocono Plateau, the Lehigh River flows 109 miles to its confluence with the Delaware River in Easton, Pennsylvania. The river valley is the homeland of the Lenape people and includes present-day cities of Allentown and Bethlehem.

Part of the Lehigh River is designated as one of Pennsylvania’s Scenic Rivers, and the headwaters are designated as Exceptional Value. The river’s name comes from the Lenape name for the river, Lechewuekink, which means “where there are forks”.

The Lehigh is a whitewater river, and both new and experienced boaters enjoy its rapids. The river connects rural and urban communities, is a direct drinking water source for hundreds of thousands of people, and as a tributary to the Delaware River, supports the drinking water supply of 15 million. Located in a region that has grown and contracted alongside the resource extraction industry, tourism to the Lehigh River has helped restore the region’s economies after the transition away from coal, timber, and steel.

THE THREAT

The region has become the logistics hub of the eastern seaboard, with warehouses and logistics centers already covering more than four square miles of land within the watershed. According to the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission, there’s another square mile (approximately) of development in the pipeline. Currently, only California’s Inland Empire can compare to the buildout happening in the Lehigh Valley.

Poorly planned, large-scale warehouse and distribution center development threatens the Lehigh River by converting critical forest and wetlands to hard surfaces—roofs and parking lots. These impervious surfaces prevent rainwater from soaking into the ground. Instead, warm, salty, dirty water runs off the pavement

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

LIA MASTROPOLO

American Rivers
(717) 763-0743
lmastropolo@americanrivers.org

DONNA KOHUT

PennFuture
(507) 778-3979
kohut@pennfuture.org

TAKE ACTION:

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PHOTO: MICHAEL DONLIN

directly into the river and its tributaries. These impacts to water quality, and the paving of the remaining open space in the urban stretches in the Lehigh Valley, disproportionately impact downstream communities that have already borne the brunt of environmental degradation and pollution.

This development also accelerates the impacts of climate change. Based on calculations in a recent economic benefit report from Our Pocono Waters, that acceleration will be costly. Watershed ecosystems provide numerous services, like water purification, air filtration, carbon storage, nutrient cycling, soil formation, erosion control, food, and recreational

value. In the Delaware River Basin, riparian buffers provide about \$11,000 per acre through these services and \$9,000 of carbon storage benefits per acre per year. The continued destruction of these buffers will increase carbon emissions and the severity of flooding, and it will be costly for communities to replace the services provided.

Better planning and development regulations could help reduce the economic and environmental impacts of development, but many local governments feel powerless. Communities throughout the region have voiced concerns, but their capacity is limited in the face of laws that fail to protect communities and the environment.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

The public can demand federal and state government decision-makers make crucial funding and legislative decisions to protect water quality from land development throughout the watershed.

Both the federal and state governments must provide their full, fair share of funding to the Delaware River Basin Commission (DRBC). This regulatory agency oversees a multi-state approach to water resource management that includes the Delaware River and its tributaries, including the Lehigh River. Its programs address water quality protections, flow management, and recreation, which is challenging to do when chronically underfunded since 2014.

The Pennsylvania state legislature must pass what's been known as the Riparian Buffer Protection Act (previously known as HB 714). This bill would ensure that all waterways across the state are guaranteed critical protective riparian buffers of at least 100 feet. High Quality and Exceptional Value waterways would be provided 300-foot buffers, which would be an increase from the current 150 foot requirement. Impaired waters would receive additional protection, as well, of 150 feet.