INTRODUCTION:

The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) has stewardship responsibilities for the Commonwealth’s natural resources, including our forest and native wild plant resources, state forests and state parks, greenways and rivers, heritage parks and other recreational opportunities, as well as topographic and geologic features. Recognizing that the extent and the quality of the Commonwealth’s ecosystems are influenced by both natural processes and human activities, DCNR is forming a Natural Gas Advisory Committee (NGAC) to advise DCNR on the environmentally sound extraction of gas resources. The Governor’s Marcellus Shale Advisory Commission Report from July 22nd, 2011 recommended that “DCNR should establish a Natural Gas Advisory Committee to enhance communications among stakeholders regarding natural gas development on state forest and park land.” (Recommendation 9.2.34). The report also recommends, “DEP and DCNR – along with industry – should continually review and examine the range of best management practices utilized during construction and operation of the well site, and consider incorporating these types of practices into regulatory and operator guidance…” (Recommendation 9.2.23). NGAC will provide valuable insight and expertise concerning the complex nature of natural gas management. Members of NGAC are expected to have an appreciation and a basic understanding of natural gas management and natural resource management.

PURPOSE:

The purpose of NGAC will be to advise and provide recommendations for implementing natural gas management in a manner which is consistent with the mission of DCNR and its Bureaus. There are several program areas involved with implementing new strategies dealing with natural gas management in DCNR, notably the Bureaus of Forestry, State Parks, and Topographic and Geologic Survey.

The primary work of NGAC will focus on state forest lands and the work of the Bureau of Forestry, whose mission includes managing state forests under sound ecosystem management, to retain wild character and to maintain biological diversity while providing pure water, opportunities for low density recreation, habitats for forest plants and animals, sustained yields of quality timber, and environmentally sound utilization of mineral resources. NGAC will provide recommendations for implementing the Bureau of Forestry’s ecosystem management and resource sustainability approach to natural gas management.

The NGAC will work with DCNR to help identify natural gas management concepts and principles, and assist in integrating them into DCNR’s natural gas management efforts on state forest and park lands.

BACKGROUND:

DCNR is charged with maintaining and preserving the 120 state parks; managing the 2.2 million acres of state forest land, conserving native wild plants; providing information on the state’s ecological and geologic resources; and establishing community conservation partnerships; and managing grants and providing technical assistance on rivers, trails, greenways, local parks and recreation, regional heritage parks, open space and natural areas.
The Bureau of Forestry’s mission statement includes the “environmentally sound utilization of mineral resources,” which includes oil and gas, as a key component of state forest management. Oil and gas management decisions must be based on the mission and work toward ensuring the long-term health, viability, and productivity of the Commonwealth’s forests and to conserve native wild plants.

For 60 years, DCNR has overseen natural gas extraction, while at the same time protecting habitat for plants and animals, landscapes of high ecological value, and back-country recreational areas. The Bureau of Forestry issued its first oil and gas lease in 1947. Historically, gas activity on state forest lands has predominantly been shallow gas wells, until 2008 when shale-gas development began. The Commonwealth owns approximately 85 percent of state forest lands and 20 percent of state park lands fee simple. On the remaining acreage, the Commonwealth owns the surface, but does not own the subsurface oil and gas rights, and is more limited in the control of surface exploration in these areas.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF DCNR:

- DCNR will provide a review of existing programs and management activities and provide any relevant information that is requested by NGAC.
- DCNR in coordination with Chairman will assist and help facilitate all NGAC meetings.
- DCNR will take under consideration recommendations of the NGAC

RESPONSIBILITIES OF NGAC:

- NGAC will provide expertise and advice to DCNR.
- NGAC members will advise DCNR on:
  - Managing natural gas development on DCNR-managed lands in a manner that is consistent with DCNR’s mission, including siting, monitoring, and restoring gas activities;
  - Identifying new natural gas technologies and techniques; and
  - Providing public outreach opportunities regarding natural gas development.
- NGAC members should continually review and examine the range of best management practices utilized during construction and operation of the gas infrastructure so that DCNR and DEP may consider incorporating these types of practices into operator and regulatory guidance.

FACILITATION:

The DCNR Bureau of Forestry will assume the lead responsibility for coordinating and facilitating the work of NGAC. DCNR will appoint a Chair of NGAC to assist with coordination and facilitation.

MEMBERSHIP:

NGAC is composed of experts from a variety of backgrounds and organizations, including conservation groups, universities, the gas industry, environmental consulting, and recreation organizations.