The Laurel Highlands is one of Pennsylvania’s most notable and breathtaking natural treasures. Interspersed with small, historic communities, the region features magnificent mountains, rushing streams with breathtaking waterfalls, and rolling hillsides with picturesque farmlands.

**Counties:**
Somerset, Fayette, Westmoreland and parts of Cambria and Bedford

**Sub-Landscapes:**
Laurel Ridge, Chestnut Ridge, Great Allegheny Passage, Stonycreek-Quemahoning,

The vast resources of raw materials in the Laurel Highlands, including iron ore, coal, clay, timber, fertile soils, waterpower and stone, served as catalysts for tremendous economic growth in industrial manufacturing in the early 19th century. Throughout the 1900s small towns built by the coal companies sprouted around every mine. The 1910s and 1920s were very active decades for coal mining; more than 16 million tons of coal was produced per year in Cambria County alone. While the 1930s saw a major decline in bituminous coal production, the mining industry remained an important part of the region’s economy through the 1980’s and mining continues today.

Along with coal and steel other early industries included logging, grist mills and glass. Virtually the entire region was clear-cut in the late 19th and early 20th century and the resulting environmental degradation helped to give rise to the conservation movement. Grist mills, used for processing grain, appeared in the late 18th century and were found throughout the area, but relatively little grain is produced in the region today.
The area’s factories also produced a variety of glass products, but little of the industry survives today. These rich natural resources that helped to fuel the industrial revolution are the same as those that we are conserving and promoting today. Ultimately these resources and our management of them will determine the region’s long-term sustainability.

The juxtaposition of some of the state’s most dramatic scenery, best recreational assets and proximity to Pittsburgh has made the Laurel Highlands a traditional vacation and tourism area. Increasingly the area attracts visitors from Washington D.C., Baltimore and Ohio and has growing appeal to a broad array of cultural and recreational visitors.

The Plan

With the decline in its manufacturing base the Laurel Highlands has undergone dramatic change in the last century. While the region’s towns have lost population and lag behind much of the state in economic development, the area is also impacted by unplanned development, second home development, and resurgence in resource extraction (coal mining, natural gas development). In spite of these challenges, the Laurel Highlands with its vast natural resources, magnificent mountain landscapes, rich historical and cultural assets, and proximity to major metropolitan areas is well positioned to benefit from sustainable tourism and industries that capitalize on the region’s natural assets. These assets make the Laurel Highlands an exciting place to live, creating a broad economic development potential for attracting new businesses, young entrepreneurs and professionals to grow the asset connected communities.

The Laurel Highlands Conservation Landscape seeks to raise region’s appeal and quality of life while crafting a model of sustainable development tied to the natural and cultural assets of the region. The initiative engage communities and partners in the area with state agencies and funding partners to conserve and protect the high quality assets and enhance the region’s economic viability.

**Resource Protection:** The landscape seeks to conserve, restore and improve the ecological, cultural, historic and recreational resources of the region. Projects include: highlighting the Youghiogheny River through the development of a water trail; conservation of key lands adjacent to state parks and forests for watershed protection, wildlife habit and recreation; implementation of a comprehensive interpretive plan to enhance the visitor experience and infrastructure improvements for state park and forest amenities.

**Community Development:** The landscape seeks to revitalize core communities and expand local and regional economies through sustainable resource use and development. Projects include: a joint plan/implementation strategy between Ohiopyle Borough and Ohiopyle State Park, including strategic economic investments in borough businesses and infrastructure; visioning sessions in local communities to help these communities move toward implementing their vision of the future; and the Trail Town Program which seeks to connect the Great Allegheny Passage and the towns along the way to encourage visitors to enjoy these towns as part of their adventure, and to help local businesses benefit from the biking/hiking boom.

**Building a Constituency:** The landscape seeks to build capacity and constituency in the region to implement and maintain the community revitalization and sustainability efforts of the ecological, cultural, historic, and recreational resources. Projects include: strategy sessions with local government, business leaders, and residents; a region-wide summit; and raising general awareness of the issues important to the region; and engaging with communities to ensure the long-term viability of the Laurel Highlands.

Project Partners include:
- Allegheny Trail Alliance
- Benedum Foundation
- Heinz Endowments
- Katherine Mabis McKenna Foundation
- Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau
- Lincoln Highway Heritage Corridor
- McCune Foundation
- PA Department of Community & Economic Development
- PA Environmental Council
- PA Historical and Museum Commission
- Richard King Mellon Foundation
- Stonycreek-Quemahoning Initiative
- Trail Town Program - Progress Fund
- Western Pennsylvania Conservancy

More Information

For more information please contact:

Kathy Frankel  
(412) 880-0486  
kfrankel@pa.gov  
www.dcnr.state.pa.us/cli

Marla Meyer Papernick  
412-481-9400  
mmpapernick@pecpa.org  
www.pecpa.org/Laurel_Highlands