



**House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing
September 14, 2020**

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Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to address the House Democratic Policy Committee on how Pennsylvania can build a more sustainable economy.

I am Jacqui Bonomo, president of PennFuture, a statewide environmental advocacy organization working on clean air, water, energy and climate issues. I am speaking to you from my home in beautiful northeast Pennsylvania, in southern Luzerne County, as our organization has instituted a mandatory work from home policy since mid-March.

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted Pennsylvania. Our eyes have been glued to news on case counts and the needless deaths caused by the virus. Well over 2 million workers have filed for unemployment since the pandemic hit the Commonwealth, creating one of the largest state unemployment crises in the country. The deep and rapid decline of our economy has been stunning and the uncertainty surrounding every business reopening, and event cancellation portends to a long road ahead.

Pennsylvania needs to take decisive state action to provide its residents a light at the end of the tunnel—family-sustaining job opportunities for today and a stronger, more resilient economy in the future.

But the pandemic shouldn't blind us to the fact that the state economy wasn't built to last before the pandemic. Economic analysis showed signs of weakness—state job growth was tracking worse than the national average. Even at its peak employment numbers, the Commonwealth had one of the worst racial equity rankings according to WalletHub. The United States trade war with China and the European Union significantly impacted steel and farmers. Communities throughout the Commonwealth are still recovering from industrial decline and the Great Recession. And Pennsylvania tied its hope of economic resurgence to gas frackers, pipelines, and petrochemicals only to see that industry fall flat—fossil fuel industries are reeling from bankruptcies, scaled back projects, and financial failure. We simply cannot rely on fracking and plastics to create a stronger economy.

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Instead, there is a growing consensus that states like Pennsylvania should prioritize stimulus and recovery investments in sustainability, clean energy, and nature-based industries due to their powerful mix of benefits: shovel-ready job creation opportunities, retention of good-paying jobs, long-term prosperity, and significantly lower pollution. Numerous statements, reports, and proposals released during the pandemic by bipartisan and non-partisan political, business, academic, and financial leaders across the country back this up and I'm attaching PennFuture's new report *A Green Stimulus and Recovery Platform for Pennsylvania* as part of my written testimony that cite many of these statements and studies.

My basic message to this Policy Committee is this: don't treat recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic like we've treated past crises. The Great Recession should be a good learning tool—relying on steep budget cuts, waiting for federal funding, and laying off state workers is a recipe for economic malaise. Ten years of weak economic growth in the Commonwealth still hasn't brought Pennsylvania back to where it was before the Great Recession.

Instead, we need to think differently. We should reject the easy, traditional path of austerity measures that will surely be debated by this body over the coming months. It doesn't work. It slows down economic recovery and according to research on past recessions, is linked to worse public health outcomes because it becomes more difficult to protect the environment and enforce basic environmental protection laws. It wasn't long ago that Pennsylvania was cited for lax enforcement of bedrock clean water laws by the EPA after years of budget cuts to the Department of Environmental Protection, putting millions at risk. Every week there is another pipeline leak, explosion, and cancer cluster. We shouldn't let this type of future unfold again.

I want to summarize our main principles for any stimulus and recovery platform and I'm happy to dive deeper during questions.

First, keep our core environmental and conservation agencies, funds, and programs whole. Since the Great Recession, the DEPs workforce has declined by 25 percent and its budget cut by 40 percent. DCNR has built up a \$1 billion maintenance backlog at our state parks and forests while it is seeing millions of more visitors than ever before. Similar budget cuts have also been levied at Pennsylvania's wildlife and river basin commissions. We're facing grave consequences today from these cuts and we should be talking about restoring and building out these important agencies, not taking the budget knife to them once again. It's dismaying that the House of Representatives spent important weeks this spring and summer debating bills that would have raided bedrock conservation funds like the Environmental Stewardship Fund and Keystone Recreation, Parks, and Conservation Fund. These types of actions are tone deaf to the needs of our residents and how we are all using public green spaces as a respite and important source of recreation.

Second, Pennsylvania should implement its own jobs program, such as a modern version of a *Civilian Conservation Corps*. Modeled after the popular new deal policy during the Great Depression, Pennsylvania could reinvent the so-called "tree army" to address the billions of dollars in natural infrastructure projects in all 67 counties—backlogged state park and forest

maintenance, green stormwater infrastructure, stream buffers, main street beautification, agriculture best-management practices, habitat management, and much more.

Rather than just a youth-based program, a modern-day Corps could leverage the large spectrum of skills from those that are unemployed, laid off from fossil fuel jobs, recently graduating from college during the pandemic, or re-entering the workforce.

Tens of thousands of jobs could be created with good paying wages and benefits. There are existing programs across the Commonwealth that offer a foundation to build from, including DCNR's Outdoor Corps, LandForce, and Power Corps PHL. While there is growing momentum at the national level to create similar programs, Pennsylvania is in a unique position because of its abundance of natural infrastructure to implement a similar program with or without federal help.

Third, support the fast-growing renewable energy sector and provide new opportunities for fossil fuel workers transitioning from failing coal and fracked gas industries. In the short-term, Pennsylvania's energy efficiency industry is poised for rapid growth and offers shovel-ready projects. Targeted investments in programs like the *Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program*, the *Pennsylvania Energy Development Authority*, DEP's *Small Business Advantage Grants Program*, and DCED's *Weatherization Assistance Program* will not only generate thousands of good-paying jobs, but also lower energy costs to small businesses and low-income residents.

Looking at longer-term recovery, Pennsylvania should continue the transition of its energy economy. Pennsylvania's aging fleet of coal plants are rapidly approaching retirement, and we need to begin planning on how to mitigate job losses and negative impacts on communities. To be successful and sustainable, we need alternatives that will not only allow economic development, but do so in a way that will also help us lower pollution and reach our climate goals.

Governor Wolf and the DEP have taken a step in this direction by working on a program to join the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI), but with the assistance of the legislature that program can be more effective. House Bill 2856 (Rep. Comitta) are important steps forward that would direct funding specifically to workers and communities impacted by plant closures.

Furthermore, enabling community solar in Pennsylvania is also a common-sense step to spur jobs and economic development while helping families and businesses save money. Those who can't put solar panels on their roof could buy or lease a share of a larger system and treat the energy generated much the same way. Currently there are over 200 projects available today if only the law was changed. House Bill 531 (Rep. Kaufer) would do just that.

Fourth, Pennsylvania should make a significant investment in its nature-based small businesses and natural infrastructure. The pandemic is profoundly impacting our outdoor recreation and agriculture industries due to worker shortages, lockdowns, and less out-of-state

tourists. While Pennsylvanians are using our abundant natural resources in historic numbers, we cannot forget about the small businesses that build an important web around these green spaces, most being core businesses in our rural towns and mid-sized cities. In addition, our farmers were already reeling because of the United States trade wars with China and the European Union and the pandemic is taking many to the brink. Pennsylvania smartly made grants available to farmers through the *Working Capital Access Program* and *CARES Act* funding, but more is needed and these programs should be recapitalized and tailored to more nature-based businesses.

But these businesses also need the state to invest in fixing the natural infrastructure they so often rely upon. Pennsylvania's water infrastructure—stormwater projects, wastewater facilities, drinking water infrastructure, buffers, and the like—are in desperate need of funding. Targeted state investments in PennVest and added incentives for green infrastructure solutions would generate over 5,000 good-paying jobs for engineers and laborers.

We shouldn't also forget that Pennsylvania is home to hundreds of thousands of abandoned and orphaned oil and gas wells. These sources of legacy pollution pockmark our landscapes, cause drinking water issues, and can vent pollution into our air. DEP has located 9,000 priority wells for plugging, but there is not enough funding and work crews to do the job.

These 4 packages of green stimulus and recovery recommendations are some of the 45 made in our *Green Stimulus* report. Each would put Pennsylvania back to work now and lay the foundation for a stronger economy moving forward.

Clearly this plan moves Pennsylvania away from any further reliance on oil, gas, and coal, and in its place presents ideas, supporting policies and programs that turn the legacies of fossil fuel on our land, air and water into jobs that expand and grow a restoration industry.

And it anticipates expanding business in energy efficiency, renewable energy, and transportation that build resilience and adaptation to climate change. As just one illustration of how this is feasible for Pennsylvania to do more in this arena, let me point out WABTEC, Erie's largest employer—a union workplace—that recently announced it will be manufacturing 25 electric diesel locomotives for use in NY Transit. Pennsylvania has the workforce, technical know-how, natural infrastructure, and creativity to build a better future.

Lastly, we are greatly concerned about our recent non-college bound high school graduates, and about the less skilled among us that have lost jobs by the millions during this crisis. And we are concerned about our recent college graduates whose job prospects also have diminished so significantly, and who likely are saddled with loan debt. We wanted to be sure these folks are not forgotten, and indeed prioritized, for jobs, and jobs that strengthen our middle class in rural and urban areas alike. Recommendations like creating a *Civilian Conservation Corps* would do just that.

PennFuture published our report to provide a more balanced debate around the economy and we build back from the mess we're in today. It's easy to rely on the solutions from past crises, except we can't afford to. We know they don't work. Our economy before the pandemic was showing that and it's certainly showing it now. We stand ready to support developing a more sustainable, equitable, and resilient economy for our great Commonwealth and I hope we can move past the more destructive debates around austerity and fossil fuel subsidies so we can stop turning our back on the rapidly growing industries that don't pollute our air, water, and landscapes.

Thank you for your time.