

History and Planning

Northeastern Pennsylvania and Anthracite

During the 150-year existence of the Pennsylvania anthracite industry, over five billion tons of anthracite were mined from deposits underlying approximately 484 square miles of surface area in Northeastern Pennsylvania. This area, called the Northern Anthracite Coal Field, is the largest of its kind in the nation and was exploited to supply 80% of the world's anthracite coal.

Peak production was reached in 1917 when nearly 100 million net tons of coal were produced. In 1947, when the world turned to other fuel sources, the mines began to close, creating serious economic, social, and environmental problems such as high unemployment, social fragmentation and a legacy of environmental degradation. The landscape, with its abandoned strip mines and industrial-era cities, is a reminder of the region's contribution to American industrial development. In addition, unemployment has been historically higher here than in other parts of the state. This region presents challenging opportunities for urban and community forestry initiatives.

Today, diversified and service-related industries have replaced mining as the economic base for the region. Industrial and office parks have been built throughout the valley. Historic landmarks and the natural beauty of the region attract thousands of visitors. However, much of the Lackawanna and Susquehanna watersheds in this region remain degraded from coal mining activities.

Few "natural" areas in the anthracite regions are healthy environments. Impacts along the Lackawanna River have been particularly severe where nutrient-poor, acidic, culm and ballast were used to build railway corridors. These degraded soils are incapable of supporting the native plant communities, which once buffered and protected the river.



As mines were abandoned, underground mine pools formed, which fed acid mine drainage into local water sources. This drainage decimated local fish populations, stained the riverbeds orange, and ravaged riverine wetlands. Acid mine drainage, erosion, sedimentation, and poor land use practices have all contributed to the continued impairments to local water quality. Only recently has this begun to change.

Program Framework

A framework for the future of urban forestry was established by the USDA Forest Service Northeastern Area Strategic Plan of 1990. The Urban Forestry *Five-Year Plan, 1995-99*, placed new emphasis on encouraging comprehensive management of natural resources.

A search began for pilot areas that could adapt holistic concepts of urban forestry resource management to real life projects. Bob Neville, then Urban Forestry Program Manager, USDA defined the new approach: *“Urban and Community Forestry has taken shifting priorities into consideration, with the hopes that funding can be allocated on a much more regional scale with regional objectives in mind. This does not imply that street trees will not be planted or that traditional arboriculture practices will be overlooked. Instead, these practices will be incorporated into a more holistic framework for community problem solving.”*

Congressman Joseph McDade realized Northeastern Pennsylvania was an ideal place for such a program. Knowing his constituency would fully support the program, he proposed its inclusion in the Interior Appropriations Bill of 1994. In a letter to Chairman Yates and the U.S. Appropriations Committee, Congressman McDade stated, *“Northeastern Pennsylvania is an excellent location to deal with the complexities of natural resource management as it relates to community sustainability in a landscape that ranges from very rural to urban. On the ground, urban forestry projects will integrate concepts of social ecology with a watershed-based framework to ensure that all local improvement actions contribute to the ecological health of the region.”*

Soon after, a number of orientation meetings were held at the USDA Forest Service’s Northeastern Area headquarters where an organizational framework was established for the program. The Pennsylvania

Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Bureau of Forestry and the Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania coordinated with program and civic leaders in Northeastern Pennsylvania to review existing programs and identify potential partners. Individual conferences took place in Scranton in November 1994.

In December of 1994, the Northeast Pennsylvania Urban Forestry Program was written into the Appropriations Bill. A large and diverse steering committee was selected to refine the program description and goals. With the signing of the Appropriations Bill in December 1994, the Program became a reality with a one million dollar allocation in the fiscal year 1995 budget. The Program was continued with allocations in 1997 and 1998.



Related Planning

In recent years, excellent community based planning initiatives have addressed natural resource objectives in the Lackawanna Valley. The Northeast Pennsylvania Urban Forestry Program's Steering Committee was intent on using the resources available through this program to support and enhance existing plans. This was accomplished by:

- supporting the existing community planning process,
- strengthening and supporting existing partnerships,
- building on in-place municipal support and understanding,
- increasing projects' visibility and community awareness,
- building economic opportunities, and
- providing technical expertise on natural resource issues.

The Program directly addressed the goals and initiatives in the *Lackawanna River Corridor Association's Citizens Master Plan*, May 1991; *The Lackawanna Heritage Master Plan*, May 1992; and *The Greenway Reconnaissance Study*, National Park Service, Mid-Atlantic Region and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1993.

In addition, the following community based planning initiatives were supported:

- *City of Scranton Comprehensive Plan*
- *Master Development for the Delaware & Hudson Rail Trail*
- *A Strategic Planning Program for the Greater Forest City Area Comprehensive Plan*
- *Scranton Cultural Center Restoration Plans*
- *Scranton Tomorrow Vision Statement*

Key Issues

Through a constituent-based process, key issues were identified and project objectives and priorities defined. Priority areas of concern were:

- a changing economy and community infrastructure identified with the decline of mining based industry and rise of tourism,
- support for recreational opportunities,
- declining quality of natural resources (forests, open space, and water) due to historic land uses and current development impacts,
- reversing a legacy of resource exploitation and exportation, and
- balancing natural resource sustainability with local economic development.

Program Goals

The goal of the Northeast Pennsylvania Urban Forestry Program was to improve the economic, social, and environmental quality of life in Northeastern Pennsylvania through community stewardship of forest and related natural resources in urban and rural communities. The Program would serve as a national model. Goals of this regional program addressed by demonstration grants included:

- a sustainable economy,
- a pleasant place for living and working,
- damaged ecosystems restored, and threatened systems protected,
- an improved ecological health of the watershed, forests, and communities, and
- a comprehensive regional process to address local issues.