

**Written Comments Submitted by the Slate Run Sportsmen to
the PA Senate ERE Committee Briefing on the DCNR ATV
Regional Trail Connector Pilot Program
Waterville, December 8, 2021**

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About Slate Run Sportsmen

Slate Run Sportsmen is a conservation organization started almost 70 years ago by a group of fly anglers in response to the degradation of trout habitat on Slate Run in northwestern Lycoming County, Pennsylvania. Our 142 members – 85% of which are residents of the Commonwealth -- are dedicated to the conservation and environmental protection of Slate Run and the greater Pine Creek watershed, as well as the preservation of the wild, pristine, and undeveloped character of the Pine Creek Valley, which we believe are its essential and defining characteristics.

Our position

Slate Run Sportsmen strongly opposes any expansion of ATV trail systems and connectors on state forest land in the Pine Creek Valley, as mandated by recent amendments to the Fiscal Code and as implemented by the DCNR's ATV Regional Trail Connector Pilot. We are particularly concerned with the connector planned between the Haneyville ATV trail system and Rausch Road. This connector has segments which parallel Trout Run and the headwaters of Manor Fork, which feeds Slate Run. These all are either Wild or Class A trout streams, all of which support natural reproduction and are cherished by the anglers that frequent them.

Habitat degradation, risks to watersheds, multi-user conflicts

Recreational motorized sports, especially those involving the use of ATV and off-highway motorcycles, are known to degrade wildlife and cold-water fishery habitat, promote erosion and sedimentation in watersheds, cause air, ground, water, and noise pollution, and, importantly, degrade or prevent the quiet enjoyment of all other recreational users of forest land, including anglers, bird watchers, mountain bikers, day-hikers, backpackers, and others. Recreational ATV use is an exclusionary use of state forest land, and is contrary to the natural, scenic, and aesthetic values embraced by Article I, Section 27 of the Pennsylvania Constitution. In view of these characteristics of recreational ATV use, trail systems must be confined to areas in which environmental and wildlife habitat damage can be minimized and conflicts with other recreational users of state forest land can be avoided.

Safety

Critically, safety issues concerning interaction of ATVs and automobiles on state forest roads must be fully evaluated and should be a top priority when considering ATV trail expansion. Slate Run, Manor Fork, and Francis Roads are frequently used between March and November by cabin owners, nature enthusiasts, hikers, backpackers, and mountain bicyclists. These slippery gravel roads are narrow, bounded by steep cliffs, and contain blind curves, which even today render them challenging to safely navigate with the current auto and truck-only traffic load. The addition of ATVs on portions of these roads most certainly would elevate safety risk, including

increased potential for operator confrontations and crashes. When one further considers that this part of the valley is lacking in adequate emergency services for timely response, it would appear to us that the seriousness of this issue has not been considered in sufficient depth.

Several camps are located just off Manor Fork Road, and, while child safety has not been a concern in the past, the designation of this road as a connector segment would dramatically escalate the risk to children and compel families to exercise the same level of caution required as if their camp were located on a city side street. This likely is not the experience they were seeking when they bought their cabins and signed their leases with the DCNR.

Economic development? – Pine Creek Valley is not Berlin, New Hampshire

One of the arguments in favor of expanding ATV trails on state forest lands in Northcentral Pennsylvania is that it will bring economic advantages to areas that are economically depressed. Berlin and Gorham, New Hampshire, often are used as examples of communities ravaged by the recent departure of the pulp and paper industry, which then reinvented themselves as playgrounds for recreational ATV use, benefiting from the resulting economic growth, while accepting the environmental consequences.

Significant differences exist between Berlin and the Pine Creek Valley. Pine Creek's major industry, logging and milling, was virtually gone by the start of the last century. One hundred and ten years since, those that remain and certainly those that have settled in the valley are those that embrace its aesthetic qualities. The families that have bought the bars, inns, restaurants, and stores were under no illusions of a future Fortune 500 buyout. And they are not people left sucking for air in the vacuum created by the departure of community-sustaining industries. They chose to come here; they made a lifestyle decision by doing so, choosing aesthetics over an easier financial path in a more populated and economically vibrant area.

Convoys of ATVs coursing down village streets to get to the gas station and bars, and riding past hunting and fishing camps on forest roads would fundamentally alter the experience of our members visiting and living in the valley and surrounding watershed and is incompatible with the values which motivate their coming here.

The connector is only the start

ATV advocates are well organized, and their efforts have tremendous momentum, which is why the connector is likely only the start of ATV trail expansion in the Pine Creek Valley. The ATV trail map which can be found on the Central Mountain ATV Association website identifies the forest trails and roads that their members would like designated for ATV use. It is nothing less than a stunning testament to that organization's acquisitive aspirations.

The map shows a leg off the connector down Slate Run Road into Slate Run village. A connector along this section of Slate Run Road would dramatically decrease the enjoyment of anglers and hikers in Manor Fork and Slate Run. The sounds of the stream and forest would be replaced by the constant din of ATV engines.

Another potential threat to the Valley and other state forest land and which also serves as further evidence of "ATV trail creep" is House Bill 478, introduced in the Spring, which has the potential to put off-highway motorcycles on par with ATVs, when it comes to designating trails on state forest land. Furthermore, it would require that the department make roads and trails available to snowmobiles, ATVs, AND off-highway motorcycles on state lands which adjoin

town roads that have been made available for any one of those uses. This legislation is an astonishing and disconcerting assault on the DCNR's discretionary decision-making authority and infringes on its ability to carry out the Commonwealth's conservatorship duties under Pa. Const art. I §27.

We Need Places without ATVs

Slate Run Sportsmen knows that many ATV riders are responsible, law-abiding people who enjoy their pastime, and we respect their right to pursue it on existing trails. However, special places which need our protection exist in our Commonwealth, where its citizens and visitors can escape urban noise, dust, and pollution. The Pine Creek Valley is the epitome of such a quiet natural place that must continue as such for the benefit of all Pennsylvanians. Interconnections of ATV trails need not blanket the entire state.

Fermata Inc. at the behest of the DCNR conducted a study on multiple use recreation in the Pine Creek Valley and published its Pine Creek Valley, Early Action Recommendations in August 2005. It stated, "We overwhelmingly heard that protection of the character of Pine Creek is critical. The people that live and work here want to keep it a special place" Slate Run Sportsmen wholeheartedly supports this principle and opposes the expansion of ATVs trails which will not protect the valuable wild character of this unique area of Pennsylvania.

While the Pennsylvania Wilds do not enjoy the "forever wild" protections of New York's Adirondack forest preserve, as accorded the latter under its state's constitution, the "Wilds" is equivalent in terms of its wildness, natural beauty and aesthetic and ecological value. Within the Pennsylvania Wilds, Tiadaghton State Forest and the Pine Creek Valley are its crown jewels, and, indeed, those of the entire state forest system. The area is unique in the Commonwealth. Lacking statutory protection, the area needs the protection of wise, forward thinking, and well-considered forest policy. If ATV trail expansion on state forest lands is inevitable, that does not mean that it must occur everywhere, particularly in the most pristine and undeveloped forest land which the "Wilds" has to offer -- Tiadaghton State Forest and Pine Creek Valley.

Its special wild and scenic character must be managed and protected for low impact recreation which does not degrade its signature attributes. The constitution of our Commonwealth requires that it act as a trustee of its natural resources. Purposely degrading its most wild and scenic forests through high impact intrusive recreation such as ATV trail expansion into wild areas is a violation of the public trust.

Our request

The Slate Run Sportsmen asks that Pennsylvania's elected officials and the DCNR end further consideration of the Rausch Road / Haneyville connector, or at the very least, route it away from Trout Run and Manor Fork Road. We simply can see no justification for endangering the Trout Run and Slate Run watersheds or for inviting the multi-use conflicts that will inevitably result.

We thank Senators Yaw and Comitta and the rest of the Committee for the opportunity to be heard today.