

ClearWater Conservancy
Everyone Working Together to Conserve Natural Beauty
and the Environment in the Heart of Pennsylvania

December 8, 2005

Senator Jake Corman
218 West High Street
Bellefonte, PA 16823

Dear Senator Corman,

As you know, ClearWater Conservancy has a strong interest in protecting and conserving central Pennsylvania lands with important resource values. An example is Spring Creek Canyon, which is highlighted in the *Spring Creek Rivers Conservation Plan* as one of “the most extraordinary and ecologically important assemblages of natural landscapes and scenic beauty” in our region. We are concerned about its ultimate protection and recommend the completion of a biodiversity analysis and conservation management plan for this sensitive area.

Several state and locally funded plans and studies, including the *Centre County Natural Heritage Inventory* (prepared by the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy for the Centre County Planning Office) and the *Spring Creek Rivers Conservation Plan* (prepared by the PSU Department of Landscape Architecture for ClearWater Conservancy and accepted by the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources), have clearly documented the importance of the Spring Creek Valley and have stressed the need to protect the natural resources found therein. The Centre County Natural Heritage Inventory, for example, designated the Spring Creek Valley, which includes the Spring Creek Canyon, as a Biological Diversity Area (BDA).

A BDA is defined as an area containing plants and animals of special concern at either state or federal levels, exemplary natural communities, or exceptional native diversity. BDAs include both the immediate habitat and surrounding lands important in the support of these special elements. The Spring Creek Valley BDA is described as “one of the most exceptional areas within Centre County for native biodiversity” and as being of “significant biological importance containing some of the most intact examples of limestone-dependent natural community types to be found anywhere in Centre County. These communities host a number of plant and animal species which are extremely uncommon in Pennsylvania, several of which are globally rare” (Western PA Conservancy 2002).

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Because of the importance of these natural resources, in 1994 ClearWater Conservancy entered into a Registry Agreement with the State Correctional Institution at Rockview (S.C.I. Rockview) as a first step in recognizing and protecting these sensitive natural resources located within the Spring Creek Canyon (Attachment 1).

Upon reviewing the proposed re-allocation of S.C.I Rockview property located north of I-99, ClearWater Conservancy would like to stress the need to carefully study the biological resources of the Spring Creek Valley BDA, develop a management plan to protect them, carefully consider how public access will affect the natural resources, and ensure that the new landowners have the financial means and the technical expertise to handle the daunting task of properly stewarding this sensitive ecosystem and natural treasure.

With the help of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, we have taken the liberty of overlaying a few significant natural features to the “Rockview S.C.I. Subdivision” map prepared by Sweetland Engineering for the state Department of General Services (Figure 1). Spring Creek and its tributaries and the Spring Creek Valley BDA as defined by the *Centre County Natural Heritage Inventory* were added to more clearly illustrate our concerns.

After consulting state and locally funded studies, including the *Centre County Comprehensive Plan*, the *Nittany Valley Comprehensive Plan*, the *Centre Region Comprehensive Plan*, the *Centre County Natural Heritage Inventory*, and the *Spring Creek Rivers Conservation Plan*, ClearWater Conservancy offers the following recommendations for the protection of our natural heritage and requests your support and assistance in implementing them.

All land included within the boundary of the Spring Creek Valley BDA should be used in a manner that ensures the protection of the biological resources of that valley.

In the past few weeks, ClearWater Conservancy representatives have met with representatives of Benner Township, the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, Penn State University, and Heritage I to discuss the sensitivity of the natural resources of the Spring Creek Canyon and its larger Spring Creek Valley Biological Diversity Area.

Each of these parties seems receptive to committing to a detailed analysis of the biodiversity of the Spring Creek Canyon and the upland areas that impact it by a team of conservation biologists, botanists, stormwater engineers, and other appropriate technical experts. ClearWater recommends that such a study be completed on all lands north of I-99 as a condition of the transfer of these lands. The study should culminate in a conservation management plan with specific recommendations intended to protect the valuable natural resources within the Spring Creek Valley BDA. We also recommend that funding for this analysis and management plan should come from the State.

In discussions with Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, several possible types of management recommendations have been suggested. These could include the designation of an appropriate buffer within which certain land uses and activities are restricted, appropriate limits on development and its associated stormwater runoff, an emphasis within the management of the property on sustainable forestry and reforestation research, restrictions on herbicide and pesticide use within the Spring Creek Canyon's watershed, and recommendations to curtail the spread of invasive species within the BDA.

Benner Township should be commended in their efforts to raise awareness of the sensitivity of the natural resources of the Spring Creek Canyon and ensure their protection. As we understand it, they are being considered as the owner of the parcel coded #6 on Figure 1. Of all of the parcels, implementing the management plan in this area will require the most technical expertise and financial resources. In considering the transfer of this exceptional natural resource to a municipal owner, the State should also accept the responsibility of providing the township with the necessary financial capacity to ensure the Spring Creek Canyon's protection.

We understand that negotiations are underway to transfer the parcels coded #1 on Figure 1 to The Pennsylvania State University to be used by the College of Agricultural Sciences. As such, the College should be included in the creation and implementation of the conservation management plan on these Penn State lands.

Based on our discussions, we are not yet sure of the ultimate plans for the ownership of parcel #2 on Figure 1, but as part of the same ecosystem, it should also be part of the conservation management plan. Whoever owns parcel #2 should abide by the same management practices as the owners of the other parcels north of I-99.

The ecological importance of these parcels cannot be overstated.

Although many in the community are also interested in the possible recreational aspects of a publicly accessible Spring Creek Canyon greenway, any recreational use of this landscape should be secondary to the protection of the natural resources. According to the *Spring Creek Rivers Conservation Plan*, "the protection of nature is of the highest priority here; access must be subordinate to the integrity of the riparian and aquatic habitats, the fragile cliffs and forested slopes, and the rare and endangered species".

Start to plan now for the rest of Rockview's land.

The proposed Senate Bill No. 987 that transfers 135 acres to the Centre County Industrial Development Corporation and the as-yet-to-be-introduced bill to transfer from state ownership the other parcels included on Figure 1 is just the beginning of the transfer of a significant portion of S.C.I. Rockview landholdings over time.

As you are aware, the State Correctional Institution at Rockview, and therefore the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, currently stewards 6,230 acres of the Spring Creek Watershed. This property contains not only the Spring Creek Canyon, but also productive farmland and a significant portion of the biologically important and famed Mount Nittany.

Given the size of these landholdings and their biological and economic significance to the county and beyond, ClearWater Conservancy strongly recommends that a comprehensive conservation and land use plan be prepared for the future of the remaining Rockview landholdings. Further, this process should be as transparent, as inclusive of all stakeholder groups, and as open to the general public as possible and should follow the recommendations of the above mentioned plans.

ClearWater Conservancy is prepared to assist in the facilitation of this effort. We will also assist the new landowners to the best of our abilities. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this critically important issue and for your efforts to protect the natural resources of the Spring Creek Canyon for future generations.

Sincerely,

Jennifer W. Shuey
Executive Director

Cc: The Honorable Edward Rendell, Governor
Honorable Mike Hanna, State Representative
Honorable Kerry Benninghoff, State Representative
Honorable Lynn Herman, State Representative
Secretary James Creedon, Department of General Services
Secretary Jeffrey Beard, Department of Corrections
Secretary Dennis Wolff, Department of Agriculture
Secretary Michael DeBerardinis, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
Douglas Austen, Executive Director, PA Fish & Boat Commission
Vernon Ross/Carl Roe, Executive Director, PA Game Commission
David Densmore, Field Supervisor, US Fish & Wildlife Service
Scott Conklin, Centre County Commissioner
Steve Dershem, Centre County Commissioner
Chris Exarchos, Centre County Commissioner
Franklin Tennis, Superintendent, State Correctional Institution at Rockview
John Elnitski, Chair, Benner Township Supervisors
Dennis McGrath, President, Western Pennsylvania Conservancy
Dennis Hameister, Chair, Spring Creek Watershed Commission
Rob Fugate, Chair, Nittany Valley Joint Planning Commission; Benner Township Planning Commission

Gary Schultz, Senior Vice President for Finance and Business, The Pennsylvania State University

Robert Steele, Dean of the College of Agricultural Sciences, The Pennsylvania State University

John Coleman, President/CEO, Centre County Chamber of Business & Industry

Steve Balkey, President, Heritage 1

Robert Jacobs, Director, Centre County Planning Office

Robert Crum, Director, Centre Regional Planning Agency

Pat Farrell, President, Mount Nittany Conservancy

Robert Donaldson, Chair, Spring Creek Watershed Community Coordinating Committee

Ann Donovan, Watershed Specialist, Centre County Conservation District

Bill Brusse, President, Spring Creek Chapter of Trout Unlimited

Genie Robine, Centre County Chapter of the PA Senior Environmental Corps

Mike Joseph, Centre Daily Times

Rich Kerstetter, Centre Daily Times

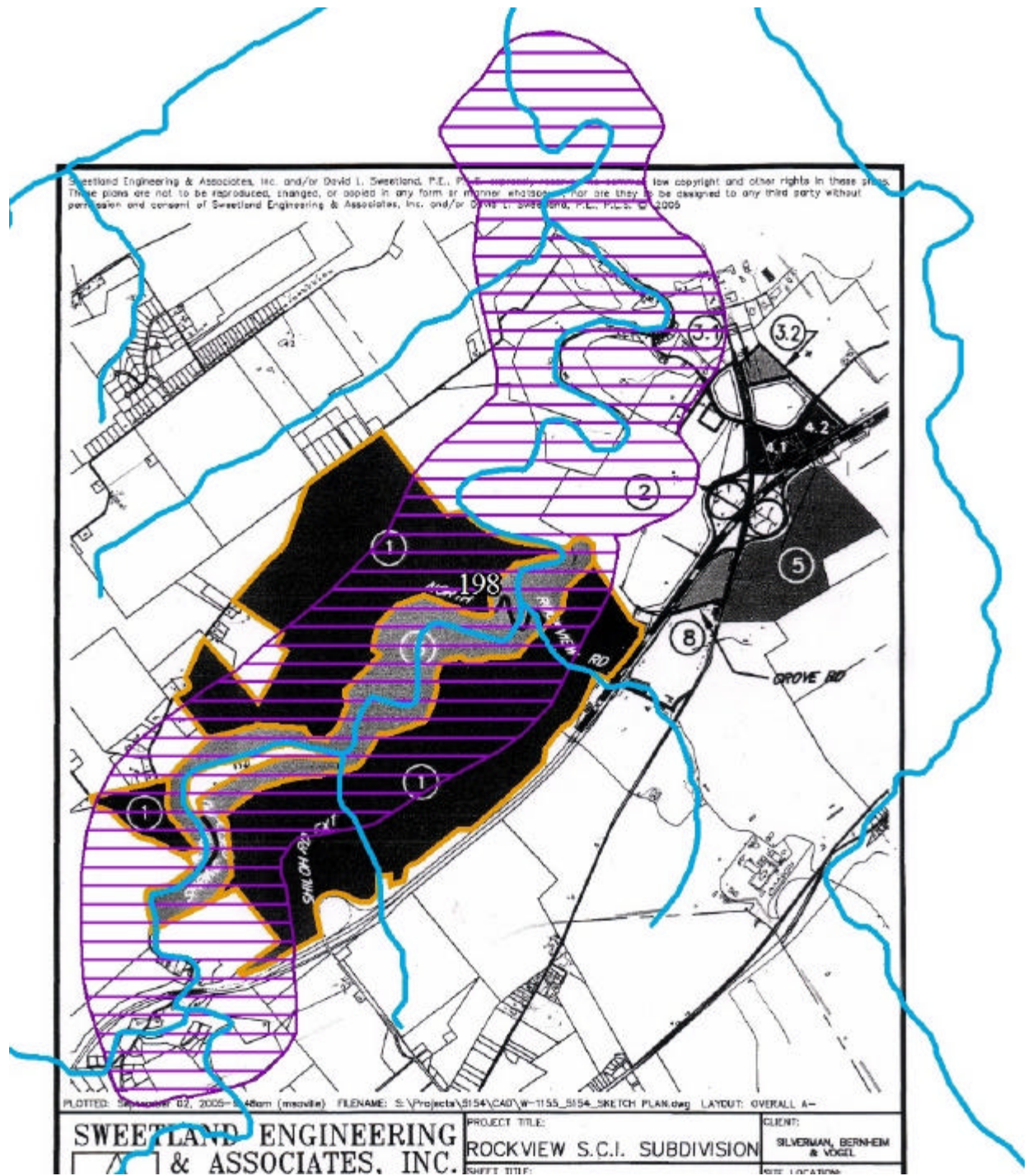


Figure 1. “Rockview S.C.I. Subdivision” map with the addition of stream data and the Spring Creek Valley Biological Diversity Area (BDA) polygon.

**ClearWater Conservancy
Registry Agreement**

This Registry agreement, made this 1st day of September, 1994, by and between State Correctional Institution at Rockview (Landowner(s)), and the ClearWater Conservancy (Conservancy).

WHEREAS, the Landowner(s) and the Conservancy recognize the significance of the Spring Creek Canyon on the SCI-Rockview land and wish to continue the stewardship and protection of this resource; and

WHEREAS, the Landowner(s) will, to the best of their ability, continue to protect this unique resource; and

WHEREAS, the Landowner(s) agree to notify the Conservancy if they plan to sell or transfer the property or resource, or change the current management practices; and

WHEREAS, the Conservancy will support the ongoing protection efforts of the Landowner(s) by providing up-to-date land management and stewardship information; and

WHEREAS the Landowner(s) will contact the Conservancy if pollution or other activities threaten the resource; and

WHEREAS the Landowner(s) and the Conservancy acknowledge that this agreement is non-binding and may be canceled by the Landowner(s) with thirty (30) days notice to the Conservancy; and

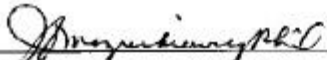
WHEREAS the Conservancy may cancel the Registry with thirty (30) days notice to the Landowner(s) if, in the opinion of the Conservancy, the Landowner(s) fails to protect the resource.

In witness thereof the said parties have hereto set their hands.

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
State Correctional Inst. at Rockview
Landowner



Don Hamer, President

by 
Landowner - J. F. Mazurkiewicz, Ph.D.
Superintendent