

Senate Confirmation Hearing
Remarks by Michael DiBerardinis
Secretary
Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
March 13, 2007

Good Morning. Madam Chairman, distinguished members and guests. It is a pleasure to appear before the committee regarding my nomination to continue as the second secretary of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

I have enjoyed my brief meetings with each of you. I would like to expand upon some of our many accomplishments since I was last here, and describe how DCNR is poised to achieve great things in service of conservation in the future.

When I appeared before you almost four years ago, I was three weeks on the job, feeling excited about a department whose mission was steeped in history, yet is still so vital to the future of Pennsylvania.

Today, I remain just as excited about being at the helm of an agency with the cornerstone services of maintaining and improving state parks; managing state forest lands to assure their long-term health, sustainability and economic use; providing mapping resources that are vital to regional and community planning, public safety, and economic development; and administering grant and technical assistance programs that benefit rivers conservation, trails and greenways, local recreation, regional heritage conservation and environmental educational programs.

True to the commitments I outlined in my remarks to you in 2003, DCNR also is expanding its mission beyond traditional boundaries to one of broad stewardship and leadership around land conservation, outdoor recreation and the role of the commonwealth's natural resources in sustainable communities, economic development and revitalization. We are poised to not only serve as the trustees of our own lands, but also use our expertise to help others invest in the natural resources to build a sustainable Pennsylvania.

The process of developing our expanded goals and mission involved me spending a good amount of time on the road in service of two promises I made in remarks to you as I began my journey with the agency – to listen to staff and challenge them to achieve

great results, and to listen and respond to stakeholders. My travels, of course, gave me a familiarity with our physical assets – our large and complex system of 117 state parks, forests, heritage areas and our work regionally.

They also allowed me to act on my belief that being a good manager means paying close attention and listening to your employees, setting goals, and creating high expectations that make the difference between success and failure.

I invested a lot of my time in learning about this agency's strengths and weaknesses from the people who make it run, and I think it was time well spent as we developed a set of measurable goals for DCNR and sought out ways to make it stronger. My commitment to listening continues today, as each year I attend more than 20 major meetings within the department as a forum to exchange vision and ideas with our dedicated DCNR staff.

The second reason for hitting the road was my belief that as public servants we have an obligation to the people we serve. I consider it a compact. We are entrusted with critical responsibilities, and it's our duty not only to provide what our citizens expect, but also aspire to give them more.

So it is vital that we listen and understand the broad issues and interests that define our stakeholders, including businesses, non-profit organizations, the General Assembly, and the recreation and conservation communities.

What we learned through the process of listening to stakeholders and staff is that citizens across the state care about conservation. They care about clean air, open space, and protected watersheds. That hunters care about global warming and its impact on habitat. That families want forests, fields and trails to recreate on. They may not call it conservation or consider themselves environmentalists but there is a deep connection to the land and water that resides in the hearts of our citizens.

Arising from that process of listening and learning about what Pennsylvanians value is a comprehensive action plan for DCNR that was guided by two underlying themes that shaped my thinking as I began my time with the department, and continue to do so today.

The first concerns sustainable economic development. Most people don't think of DCNR as an economic development agency, but the reality is very different. In the rural

areas of the state, where economic stimulus is perhaps most needed, our state parks and forests fuel businesses and drive the local economy. From tourism to timber production, our natural resources help Pennsylvania thrive and prosper.

We are very proud that Pennsylvania has one of the country's largest sustainable certified forests -- 2.1 million acres -- managed as a sustainable ecosystem. We will continue to oversee our state forests in this manner to yield high-quality timber and ensure a healthy forest today and in the future.

Guided by Governor Rendell's vision to link the conservation of the state's natural resources to an integrated strategy to stimulate economic growth and create vibrant communities, we also are very proud that our efforts to maximize the value of our parks and forests has resulted in an initiative known as the Pennsylvania Wilds. It is a national model for mobilizing and coordinating a wide array of conservation, tourism promotion, economic development and community revitalization interests. By using tourism to promote appropriate stewardship and conservation, we are helping to revitalize communities while retaining their rural character.

We also learned that to emulate the successes we are experiencing in the Pennsylvania Wilds in other landscapes across the commonwealth, we need to seek out ways to leverage our investments; work closely with local and county governments; manage the natural resources appropriately; and promote collaborative work among DCNR bureaus and with other state agencies. These are important lessons that will guide our work over the next several years.

Through our grant programs and leadership efforts, we also are working in cities and towns across the state to regain access and clean up their rivers as tools for revitalization, protect open space and provide recreational opportunities that help create communities where people want to live, work and play.

The second underlying theme that continues to shape my approach to my responsibilities is the opportunity that a leadership role in shaping a sustainable Pennsylvania holds for our agency.

While maintaining our core functions of managing state parks and forests and helping communities meet their recreation goals, we are forging new paths in the arenas of open space protection, private land stewardship, biodiversity conservation, sustainable

communities, deer management for forest regeneration, and around policy issues such as the impacts of wind power on wildlife and carbon sequestration to address global warming.

And later this year, we will be extending this leadership role by launching a new communication and visitor-based initiative to more actively engage Pennsylvanians in conservation and with DCNR.

I think we are at a unique moment of opportunity to apply our expertise in these new venues to protect our natural heritage and secure its future for the benefit of every citizen of Pennsylvania.

I believe constant communication will be key to our continued progress, and I pledge that DCNR will continue to be accessible and responsive to citizens and stakeholders.

My four years with DCNR have deepened my appreciation and respect for the men and woman who serve this department, and expanded my expectations about what is possible for the agency to accomplish.

It would be an honor for me to continue to serve the citizens of the Commonwealth as DCNR secretary. I ask that you give me the opportunity to do so. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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