

FIVE YEAR STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN

*For the Pennsylvania Water Trail Program
2025-2029*



Photo Credit: Kara Foran



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INTRODUCTION

The Pennsylvania Water Trails Partnership began in 2008 with a shared goal for the successful promotion and management of water trails. The partnership was created to achieve a common vision that included:

- Developing more water trails in Pennsylvania.
- Strengthening connections between existing water trails to promote a system of trails.
- Marketing and promoting Pennsylvania water trails more effectively.
- Providing technical assistance to local managers implementing water trails.
- Promoting national recognition of Pennsylvania's water trails.
- Providing assistance to managers for long-term maintenance, stewardship, and sustainability.
- Promoting water trails as a means to enhance citizen stewardship of local water resources.

Since that time, the network has grown to include over 2,300 miles of trails across all the major watersheds in the state. The 28 individual trails that make up the network provide for a wide array of recreational experiences and showcase diverse organizations and citizen groups that work together to promote their waterways' unique outdoor experiences.

The PA Water Trail Program and this 5-year Strategic Action Plan aim to help fulfill the vision of the [Pennsylvania Land and Water Trail Network Strategic Plan](#), developed and released by the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (PADCNR). Specifically, the Water Trail Program and this Strategic Action plan advance several key strategies defined in the Pennsylvania Land and Water Plan such as assessing and closing trail gaps to ensure trail access within 10 minutes of every Pennsylvanian, coordinating funding decisions for priority projects, cultivating partnerships to build capacity, and maintaining and improving existing trails and related infrastructure. The Water Trail Partnership is central to achieving these goals.

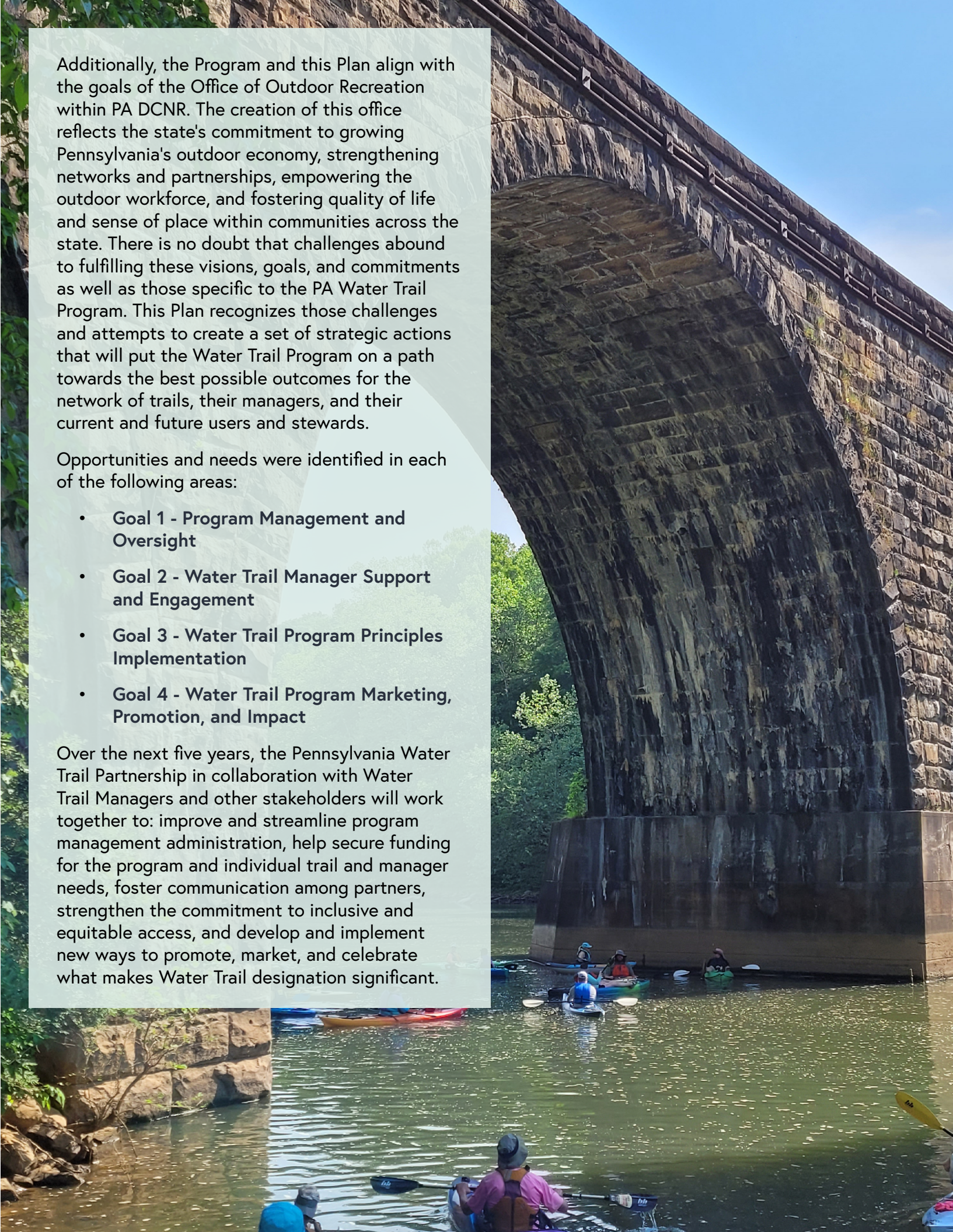


Additionally, the Program and this Plan align with the goals of the Office of Outdoor Recreation within PA DCNR. The creation of this office reflects the state's commitment to growing Pennsylvania's outdoor economy, strengthening networks and partnerships, empowering the outdoor workforce, and fostering quality of life and sense of place within communities across the state. There is no doubt that challenges abound to fulfilling these visions, goals, and commitments as well as those specific to the PA Water Trail Program. This Plan recognizes those challenges and attempts to create a set of strategic actions that will put the Water Trail Program on a path towards the best possible outcomes for the network of trails, their managers, and their current and future users and stewards.

Opportunities and needs were identified in each of the following areas:

- **Goal 1 - Program Management and Oversight**
- **Goal 2 - Water Trail Manager Support and Engagement**
- **Goal 3 - Water Trail Program Principles Implementation**
- **Goal 4 - Water Trail Program Marketing, Promotion, and Impact**

Over the next five years, the Pennsylvania Water Trail Partnership in collaboration with Water Trail Managers and other stakeholders will work together to: improve and streamline program management administration, help secure funding for the program and individual trail and manager needs, foster communication among partners, strengthen the commitment to inclusive and equitable access, and develop and implement new ways to promote, market, and celebrate what makes Water Trail designation significant.



HISTORY & STRUCTURE

On September 30, 2008, officials from the PADCNr, the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC), the Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC), and the National Park Service signed an agreement to encourage the expansion and enrichment of Pennsylvania Water Trails. This agreement brought these four partners together in concert with federal and local governments, volunteers, and non-profit groups to create a farther-reaching, better maintained, and better marketed Pennsylvania water trail system. It also served to foster agency engagement with citizen stewardship of the commonwealth's water trail system.

Today there are 28 designated Water Trails, each managed by a local entity responsible for working with their local and regional stakeholders and constituents to advance and implement the Program's eight main principles, defined in more detail in Appendix A:

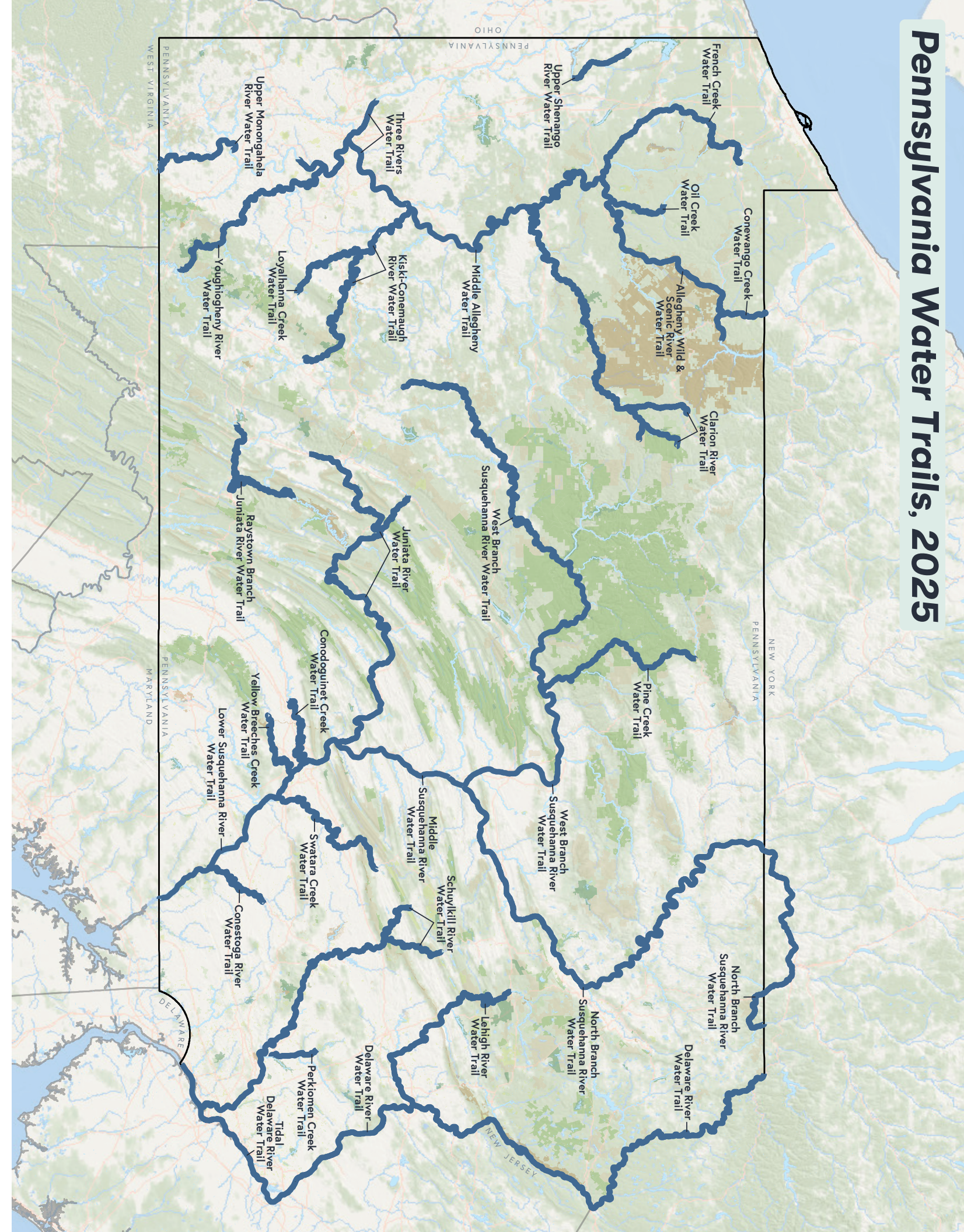
- Partnership
- Stewardship
- Volunteerism
- Education
- Conservation
- Community Development
- Inclusive Access
- Wellness and Wellbeing

The Partnership aims to support the efforts of local Water Trail Managers by:

- Providing access to technical, organizational, topic-relevant training, assistance, and resources;
- Evaluating and developing strategies for addressing shared and unique challenges facing Managers;

- Convening networking opportunities for Managers, partners, other technical service providers, and funders;
- Administering a mini-grant program to provide financial support and assistance for Water Trail enhancements and recreation experiences;
- Securing additional financial support for innovative programs and projects to help advance the eight program priorities; and
- Promoting Water Trails as exceptional destinations for non-motorized boating experiences.

PEC plays a major role in the Pennsylvania Water Trails Partnership. With funding from the PADCNr, PEC serves as the primary coordinator of the Program Partnership, convening meetings of the Executive Committee, facilitating implementation of the elements of this Strategic Action Plan, and responding in a timely manner to new challenges and opportunities. Learn more at www.pawatertrails.org.



ABOUT THIS PLAN

The PA Water Trail Program has evolved since its inception. Changes over time were guided by or were responses to the 2017-2022 Strategic Plan, Pennsylvania Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans (SCORPs), Pennsylvania Land and Water Trail Network Strategic Plan, Pennsylvania's Fishing and Boating Access Strategy, changes in agency priorities, insights shared by Water Trail Managers, funding opportunities, the impacts of COVID-19, and increased emphasis on responding to emerging issues such as the increased attention to equity and inclusion on trails, and the continuing influence of climate change requiring considerations about adaptation and resilience.

It was important to the Program partners that time was taken to seriously consider the aforementioned as well as to gather current meaningful insights and input from water trail managers to inform this plan. A priority was also placed on creating a Strategic Action Plan- one that would, as clearly as possible given the five-year implementation time frame and the

inevitable unanticipated changes that are likely to occur in that time- outline and prioritize actions, responsible parties, timeline, and necessary resources to the extent practicable. Some of the strategies and actions described herein have already started to take shape. Others are longer term goals that will require additional research and resource commitments not yet available. This document is a plan for strategic actions, that may evolve, to ensure they continue to meet the needs and priorities of those it has been created to support- Water Trail Program Executive Partners, Water Trail Managers, and the users of rivers and streams as outdoor recreation assets.

This Plan advances four high level goals, each with several strategic outcomes which will be met though implementing a series of actions and activities. When possible, these are quantitative and tangible actions/activities. However, some are concepts or ideas that are still in the exploration phase and the plan highlights the need for further investigation to determine what steps should be taken in the future.



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GOAL #1

Program Management & Oversight

Strategic Outcome:

Improved program management and administrative consistency and documentation

While significant progress has been made, there remains room for Program administrative oversight and process management improvements. Historically, Water Trail Managers have engaged and participated as dependable partners. When staff turns over within managing organizations, at PEC, or at the state agencies new staff been able to "catch up" and administer respective components of the program in a timely manner.

However, improving elements of program management and administration, such as record and file keeping protocols, template or model documents for easy replication and use, policy development and adherence, more formal agreements such as MOUs, an updated Water Trail Manager Guide, and others will make for more efficient and effective management and will ensure that the institutional knowledge is maintained to avoid gaps in service to Water Trail Managers and staff. This will avoid the constantly reworking or recreating of program processes and documents. Additionally, the outcomes below help maintain the integrity of the Water Trail designation, better serve Trail users, and encourage fair and equitable treatment of existing and future manager organizations.



ACTIONS & ACTIVITIES:

1. Final versions of key documents are saved in a shared folder that is easily accessible by PEC staff.
2. Create templates for documents that have repeated uses and add them to the shared space:
 - a. Examples - welcome letter to new Water Trail Managers of existing and newly designated trails; press releases for announcing new trails, mini grant award availability and recipients; Water Trail mini grant success story/ final report template; MOUs; etc.
3. Develop MOUs among Program partners and Water Trail Managers to make commitments, roles, responsibilities, and expectations known and agreed upon.
4. Define "Absentee managers" and "orphaned trails" and create a process for re-engaging or removing a designated trail or manager.
5. Create process for identifying Water Trail manager representatives to Executive Committee.
6. Define and implement a process for adopting new policies.

Strategic Outcome:

Diverse funding mechanisms and strategies for general program sustainability and impact as well as for unique and innovative programming and opportunities

Historically, funding for coordination and implementation of the Water Trail Program by PEC has been almost exclusively provided by DCNR with match requirements being met with mini-grant recipients' required match and a small portfolio of rotating private foundation funding. With DCNR grant match requirements and private foundation priorities changing and evolving, additional and varied funding sources must be identified to ensure long term sustainability of the program and its management.

Additionally, the understanding of outdoor recreation benefits and needs are growing and the demand for more access and opportunities exists from both Pennsylvania and tourists. More diversified funding can help PEC and partners address:

- physical access improvements,
- outreach, education, training,
- programming,
- promotion of water trail assets,
- program impact assessment,
- mapping & signage needs,
- safety concerns, and more.

ACTIONS & ACTIVITIES:

1. Program Partners identify opportunities to adjust match requirements and support reasonable match expectations through diverse funding sources.
2. Program partners share opportunities for new funding sources as appropriate, and assist with relationship building with new funders, and strengthen ties with existing funders.

3. Executive Program partners actively support applications for funding by others through letters of support and commitment and other means as appropriate.
4. Executive Program partners support evaluating Water Trail Program priorities and adopting changes to them to reflect new priorities of federal, state; and private funders when applicable and within reason.
5. Executive Program partners work to gain buy-in from managers if funding opportunities have specific geographical focus; such efforts could serve as "pilot projects" which result in benefits that could be expanded statewide if/and when additional funding is available.
6. Executive Program partners recognize that application timelines and program implementation efforts vary greatly among funding sources and necessitate reasonable accommodations for edits and updates to scopes of work and budgets.
7. Executive partners continue to support the Water Trail Mini Grant program as a benefit of designation of water trails and ensure that it evolves to meet changing needs, costs, priorities.

Strategic Outcome:

Coordination with POWR that enhances impacts of both programs

The Pennsylvania Organization for Watersheds and Rivers (POWR), an affiliate program of PEC's, also serves to advance conservation, stewardship, and recreation initiatives, but with programming and constituency that in some cases overlaps that of the Water Trail Program and also expands upon it. For example, some Water Trail managers also serve their communities as the local watershed stewardship, conservation, and advocacy organization and many Water Trail Managers engage with and benefit from POWR's longstanding Sojourn Mini-grant and River of the Year (ROY) programs and ad hoc or temporary programs such as the access enhancement programs. In turn, these POWR led program serve to advance principles of the Water trail Program.

However, some Water Trail management organizations have missions and mandates that focus on tourism, economic well-being, community development and planning and therefore benefit tremendously from working with community watershed organizations to implement principles of the Water Trail Program for which the trail organization is less well suited.

The Water Trails Program should help managers expand and build on these connections and overlapping and intersecting missions and

initiatives, to strengthen both programs and enhance impacts and outcomes for organizations, communities, and recreationalists.

ACTIONS & ACTIVITIES:

- 1. The Water Trail Program will work with POWR to ensure that the Sojourn Mini-grant program is a vehicle for furthering the goals of increasing inclusive and equitable access to PA rivers and helps to diversify experiences and users.
- 2. PEC/POWR staff develop an approach to considering, promoting, recognizing, and lifting up the principles of the Water Trail Program within the Sojourn and River of the Year applications and selection.
- 3. Create specific and targeted communication and outreach strategies to facilitate and celebrate watershed association member involvement in water trail management efforts AND Water Trail Managers in watershed association and events and stewardship efforts. Consider hosting and promoting events where meaningful networking among these constituencies can occur.
- 4. Align new Water Trail Program initiatives with relevant and applicable elements of PEC/POWR's Water Strategic Plan.



GOAL #2

Water Trail Manager Support & Engagement: Existing and New Managers

Strategic Outcome:

Benefits of Water Trail designation extended to more waterways, communities, and users

The benefits of Water Trail designation are many - for users, potential managers, and local communities. The designation of more qualifying waterways as Water Trails extends these benefits to more people across the Commonwealth. These benefits include recreational waterways becoming well-managed recreational assets; more maps, wayfinding signs, and online resources for users are created and made available; important safety information is communicated to more paddlers and river recreationalists; and perhaps more people will select to visit and enjoy paddling on PA's waterways bringing tourism revenue to more local communities.

Additionally, there are many waterways in PA that are used for non-motorized recreation activities where conditions for designation based upon the current criteria cannot be reasonably met. Still, these 'recreational waterways,' their users, and the communities that boarder them could and should have access to the improved management and other benefits of the Water Trail Program designation and/or recognition. The goal of a tiered program would be to offer the benefits of the Water Trail program to more groups and waterways while preserving the integrity of the standing Water Trail designation.

ACTIONS & ACTIVITIES:

1. Develop and implement a communication strategy to convey the current criteria and benefits of designation to new and potential Water Trail Managers.

2. Develop individual plans for designating more Water Trails under the existing criteria: Identify and reach out to interested local trail and other entities serving communities along waterways that have a clear potential to be designated under the current criteria for Water Trail designation to define those criteria that are not being met; create plans for addressing 'gaps' so that they are eligible for nomination.
3. Develop a list of existing designated Water Trails where new accesses have been completed or are under construction up or down stream of the existing designated section of waterway and implement the existing policy for adding trail miles to existing designated Water Trails.
4. Coordinate with appropriate partners to identify and map water ways that are used for non-motorized recreation and define their characteristics, including local partners for management, and a method for defining characteristics of a variety of "tiered" designations. Identify challenges, barriers, concerns, and issues related to such secondary designations.

Possible focus areas: Middle Monongahela, Lackawaxen, Lower Shenango. Tributary Trail designations for waterways that are tributaries to existing designated Water Trails or in regions where no Water Trail designations exist.

Strategic Outcome:

Trail Managers are supported with long term trail management issues, concerns, opportunities

According to surveys of Water Trail Managers, paid staff dedicate a wide range of hours to Water Trail related activities monthly from fewer than 5 hours to over 100. Several managers do not have paid staff, so management responsibilities and related activities are carried out by volunteers who contribute anywhere from 5 to 40 hours per month. Annual budgets for Water Trail management activities also vary considerably. But at the end of the day all managers are responsible for meeting minimum management, oversight, outreach, education, and community engagement standards. Water Trail Program Executive Partners have an obligation to provide support, resources, tools, and technical assistance to managers so that they can reasonably meet their responsibilities, but more importantly so that they can meet the needs of recreation users to the greatest extent practicable. As Coordinator, PEC should continue to carefully document and respond to Water Trail Manager needs and priorities to the greatest extent practicable.

ACTIONS & ACTIVITIES:

1. Continue to administer annual surveys of the Water Trail Managers to determine needs, priorities, changes over time in important determinants of satisfaction of Program implementation, etc.
2. Convey results of surveys to managers and partners and identify specific solutions and responses to most pressing needs and priorities.
3. Develop management guides/templates/tools to limit duplication of effort and to increase efficiencies.
4. Continue membership with River Management Society to gain exposure to emerging trends in recreational waterway use, policy, management, and tools.
5. Attend relevant meetings, and conferences to maintain robust and meaningful relationships with partners and, similarly to above, to gain exposure trends, resources, tools, and new ideas.

*The full results of the 2024 survey of Water Trail Managers can be accessed on [PEC's website](#).



Strategic Outcome:

Create and implement robust strategy for peer learning and communication to and among Water Trail Managers

In every annual survey of Water Trail Managers, responses indicate that one of the top benefits of the Water Trail Program is the networking and peer learning opportunities. Although Water Trails differ from one another in many ways and the managing organizations, too, are varied, there are also many shared challenges for which common approaches to solutions are possible. Ideas generated in one basin can often be applied to another. Even experiences of waterway managers in other states can help inform management of PA Water Trails. Water Trail managers are incredibly busy running programs, meeting with local partners, implementing grant funded projects, and often managing staff and/or boards of directors. Capacity for tracking the status, trends, and availability of new tools for effective water trail and outdoor recreation management is limited. PEC staff as coordinators of the statewide program should serve in the role of "conduit" and "liaison" in these situations.

Effective communication to managers and Program partners and as well as opportunities for meaningful networking are critical.

ACTIONS & ACTIVITIES:

1. Host webinars, regional or topic-based meetings, statewide managers meeting. Use event evaluations to ensure managers' expectations and needs are met and to inform additional such events.
2. Maintain and update the Resources for Managers page on the www.pawatertrails.org website as new resources become available or as requested.
3. Explore additional communication tools such as an e-Newsletter that includes news, program updates, funding announcements, spotlights on success, resources, meeting invitations, etc. Implement such tools based on appetite for them.
4. Serve as conduit and liaison for useful, helpful, and relevant content from national partners to Pennsylvania's Water Trail Program community.



GOAL #3

Water Trail Program Principles Implementation

Strategic Outcome:

"Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB)" as a theme is considered and applied appropriately to water trail management, outreach/education, use, and managers' priorities

Across the board, most outdoor recreation engagement and management organizations and agencies are making a commitment to ensuring that access to and the benefits of outdoor recreation are available to all who desire to take advantage of them and that programs, services, trails, and amenities are inclusive and as equitably distributed as possible. The PA Water Trail Program is committed to doing so as well. However, this is a complex issue with an almost overwhelming number of challenges, concerns, opportunities, resources, approaches. So even a 5-year plan, will only be able to accomplish so much within this theme. PEC and the Water Trail Program will focus on continuing to learn more about Water Trail Manager priorities and needs, providing links to resources that best meet these needs, and developing priority next steps for enhancing DEIB on PA's Water Trails. Some ideas, resources, tools, and approaches that will be considered are below, but these will evolve as all those within the Water Trail network learn more and decide which are most relevant and which will have the greatest impact on managers and users.

ACTIONS & ACTIVITIES:

1. Facilitate training/dialogue about DEIB to advance shared objectives and outcomes among Water Trail Managers and partners and facilitate use of existing resources of

- interest to managers such as the [CDRW DEIJ Messaging and Social Media Guide](#).
2. Invite leaders of organizations which focus on reconnecting and engaging underrepresented communities and people (affinity groups) to and with outdoor spaces to Water Trail Program events.
 3. Investigate and share findings with water trail managers and executive partners on how other states, water trail systems, and recreational managers are supporting and advancing DEIB
 4. Create and distribute a Best Practices Approach to Multilingual Communication with River Visitors for Water Trail Managers.
 5. Consider how and whether to promote other opportunities and for inclusive outdoor water-based recreation when the Water Trail Program cannot meet needs or where access may not be needing user needs yet. See, for example <https://sfbaywatertrail.org/plan-your-trip/accessibility/>
 6. Seek opportunities and funding for unique and innovative ways to connect more diverse populations to Water Trails and water recreation such as the current Artist in Residency project being piloted in the Susquehanna Basin.
 7. Consider and evaluate if and how findings from the Chesapeake Bay Program's commissioned study Public Access Research Final Report can inform relevant actions related to DEIB.

Strategic Outcome:

Focus on Education Principle: Trail signage and public education relevant to water trail access, usage, safety, etiquette

Why is it so difficult to just get people to do what you want them to do even when that thing is "easy," "seemingly obvious," "common sense," "the law," or if it will quite literally keep them alive! Water Trail managers provided a long and varied list of responses to the survey question "what information or messaging do you wish water trail users would do or not do?" This and other survey questions and conversations have made it clear that while managers and agency partners have created amazing outreach and education content, there is still a need to focus on the Education Principle and for the Water Trail Program to support efforts to communicate more effectively with a diverse and growing population of trail users. Waterways that have been designated as Water Trails, were important to Pennsylvania's history, culture, and communities before they were Water Trails. Water Trails can and should help create a sense of place, ownership, belonging, and connection for those who live, visit, and recreate along them.



ACTIONS & ACTIVITIES:

1. Prioritize public education messages and priority audiences and implement creative, multimedia communication strategies to share those messages with the audience.
2. Explore feasibility and impact of a mascot/character who would be used to brand PA Water Trail messaging in a fun, creative, and impactful way.
3. Create best practices and/or Program Guidelines for new Water Trail signage including guidelines related to using multiple languages, iconography, message prioritization, safety text, etc. Develop guidelines and templates for different kinds of signs- mike marker; viewed from road, viewed from waterway, on bridges, portages, etc.
4. Evaluate, encourage, and implement opportunities to "tell diverse, interesting, and 'untold' stories" using signage along water trails in addition to basic wayfinding/safety/map information.
5. Promote wellness, wellbeing, and other health benefits of outdoor recreation including paddling sports. Target messaging to diverse audiences- youth, families, retirees, veterans, etc.



GOAL #4

Program Marketing, Promotion, & Impact

Strategic Outcome:

Accurate information about Water Trails is easily accessible in online/web-based formats

While it would be impossible to ensure complete accuracy on every trails, tourism, and outdoor recreation website, webpage, and map on the internet, increased use of recreational assets such as Water Trails and other waterways requires that accurate information be accessible, and that inaccurate information is limited to the extent practicable so that people are less likely to be led astray. This strategy addresses ensuring, to the best of PEC's ability, that accurate information about water trails is available on key websites such as tourism bureaus' websites, government agency sites, outfitters' websites, and the National Rivers Project website.

ACTIONS & ACTIVITIES:

1. Executive Partners help identify certain websites, site hosts, and other partners to target to ensure accurate information is more likely to be found by searches. (Ex. There is a lot of misinformation about the Allegheny Water trail sections on some top tourism/trail sites.)
2. Executive Partners review and update relevant websites to ensure information accuracy and that maps on all associated site list only officially designated Water Trails as such. These websites should also direct visitors to the official PA Water Trail Website, www.pawatertrails.org
3. Ensure accurate and up-to-date information is available and maintained on the www.pawatertrails.org website.

4. PEC works with staff at the River Management Society to ensure accurate and up to date information is available about designated Water Trails on <http://www.nationalriversproject.com/> as the goal of that resource is to increase visibility and use for Water Trails, Wild and Scenic Rivers and whitewater sections of recreational waterways.
5. Work with PEC staff and partners to develop and maintain accurate data about Water Trails on PA Trail Finder tool and evaluate opportunities for additional online/mobile applications.



Strategic Outcome:

Water Trail Program branded/approved paddler information, trail promotion, and community outreach resources are created and distributed

The Managers of officially designated Water Trails provide specific, important, useful, and informative content for users of the trail system. These include maps, itineraries, signage, safety information, and more. It is these resources that are a major factor that distinguishes a PA Water Trail from a recreational waterway one can paddle on. These informational resources also help address some concerns regarding paddlers accessing waterways without the proper information necessary for a safer experience. Finally, these resources help meet a certain level of "expectation" for a user and may also provide a sense of confidence when someone is looking for a new waterway to access, paddle, enjoy.

The effort put forth by organizations to manage it as a unique feature on the landscape should be rewarded, including by wider spread recognition of these Trails as the amazing recreational assets they are. And Water Trail Managers have requested easy to use, access, and edit communication resource 'templates' to facilitate outreach about their own trails and the statewide Water Trail Program. Therefore, the Program Partners should coordinate an effort to create, deliver, and circulate promotional material that informs the recreating public about the benefits of designation and about the individual designated Water Trails.

Target audiences for trail information, promotional material, and outreach resources can include paddlers and other recreational users, Water Trail Executive Partners, Water Trail Managers and their local partners, outfitters, and other community members.

ACTIONS & ACTIVITIES:

1. Embrace opportunities to promote Water Trails in publications such the PFBC Pennsylvania Angler and Boater Magazine, and others.

2. Promote Water Trails at conferences, summits, in PA and beyond.
3. Work with communications staff within PEC and partner organizations to feature and promote Water Trails and the Program in social media posts and blogs, including paid advertising opportunities when possible.
4. Promote specific benefits of Water Trails with targeted messaging to specific stakeholders: funders, municipalities, businesses.
5. Create a communication strategy, content, and a delivery mechanism for outfitters and others who are asked for suggestions and content regarding recreational opportunities on waterways in to promote Water Trails appropriately, accurately, and as often as is reasonably practicable. Strategy could include a PA Water Trail rack card for distribution at hotel lobbies, tourism bureaus, info kiosks; a PA Water Trails Virtual Passport- users/visitors collect 'stamps' available at certain sites/locations.
6. Partner with PFBC to promote Water Trails and outdoor river-based recreation in the Angler and Boater magazine on a regular basis.
7. PEC and Executive Program partners promote and celebrate events and accomplishments of Water Trail managers: press releases, news feature on Water Trail website, invite managers to be a guest on PEC's podcasts, etc.
8. General guidelines for Water Trail signage are created to ensure ease of readability, message consistency, minimum standards for content and design, and current best practices for meeting the needs of diverse audiences considering elements related to inclusive and equitable access to the information.

Strategic Outcome:

Coordinated social media campaigns designed for managers' use that share important news and celebrate Water Trails, managers, and paddlers

Effective social media campaigns and outreach takes time, effort, and message consistency. Many of the messages that Water Trail partners share or could share have broad appeal and applicability beyond a specific region or geography. Developing a more coordinated approach to some social media communications could save time and effort redundancies and could offer this important communication tool to more managers who may not have the resources to engage individually.

Additionally, there are important and time sensitive messages about boating safety as well as opportunities to celebrate and raise awareness that lend themselves to a broad social media campaign.

ACTIONS & ACTIVITIES:

- 1. Develop a policy, approach, and responsible parties for a well-coordinated PA Water Trail Social Media Campaign platform. Such a campaign is to complement agency and organization's current social media approaches and be available a new tool to those who currently lack the capacity for a robust social media presence.
- 2. Create a social media campaign to communicate and celebrate various specially recognized days (National Safe Boating Week, Get Outside Days, Parks and Recreation Professionals month, River Month, etc.) to promote opportunities and awareness of water trails, managers using social media.
- 3. Evaluate impact of the campaign, ease of use, overall satisfaction and adjust accordingly.



Strategic Outcome:

Develop and implement a method or approach to assess, measure, communicate, and celebrate the Impact and Success of the PA Water Trail Program

Whether or not it really was business management expert Peter Drucker who said, "you can't manage what you don't measure," or "what gets measured gets done," it still stands to reason that the general sentiment is true. And it is also likely that what gets assessed, measured, and effectively communicated to funders is likely to continue to receive support. Finally, a program that is meeting the needs of the target audience such as partners, stakeholders, and, specifically for Water Trail Program, the Managers and the recreational users of the Trail system, will also experience long-term engagement and overall satisfaction and positive press!

For these, and many other reasons, this 5-year SAP calls for developing and then implementing a method or approach to assess, measure, communicate, and celebrate the Impacts and Successes of the PA Water Trail Program without placing unnecessary burdens on the Water Trail Managers or other program partners. Several meaningful metrics should be selected, a data capture mechanism identified, and effective data communication to Trail Managers, partners, and outside entities implemented. The outcome should convey qualitative and quantitative impacts and should celebrate successes supported by and made possible by Water Trail Program implementation.

Additionally, the Water Trail Plan should begin to consider how to assess, measure, and communicate the economic impact of river-based, Water Trail, paddling activities for municipalities and for PA. The outcome of this effort could be used to support additional local and municipal engagement with Water Trail Managers to advance Water Trail program priorities, especially those related to increased, enhanced, and improved access to Water Trails.

ACTIONS & ACTIVITIES:

- 1. Secure buy-in and support for a method or approach to assess, measure, communicate, and celebrate the Impact and Success of the PA Water Trail Program from Program Executive partners and managers.
- 2. Secure funding for this effort; including for a third-party consultant.
- 3. Evaluate what needs to be measured and develop methods for data collection. Consider economic, user, community, and manager impact.
- 4. Identify the best communication strategies for sharing information and results.
- 5. Work with executive Program partners, managers, and funders to ensure approach is supported as being useful.
- 6. Identify ways assessment can be used to support state agency and partner priorities (example: PA land and Water Plan, SCORP, etc.).
- 7. Identify opportunities for collecting data to measure the economic impact of river-based, Water Trail, paddling activities for municipalities and for PA.



APPENDIX A

Water Trail Program’s Eight Main Principles

The Pennsylvania Water Trails Program has Eight Guiding Principles:

PARTNERSHIP



A water trail is the product of partnerships among an array of government and non-governmental entities. With volunteers as the key supporters and advocates of the trail, partnerships are developed among government land managing agencies, private property owners, government regulatory agencies, user groups, and local businesses. Together, these groups can create, maintain, and promote a successful water trail with broad-based and long-term support.

STEWARDSHIP



Water trails promote minimum-impact practices that ensure a sustainable future for waterways and adjacent lands. Water trails promote the responsible use and enjoyment of the outdoors. A trail user who understands their potential impact to water, soil, vegetation, wildlife, and other trail users will be a better caretaker. When users learn to protect and restore areas along the trail, they may be inclined to do likewise in their own communities and backyards.

VOLUNTEERISM



Most water trails are created, promoted, and maintained through the energy and dedication of local citizens, working individually and through organizations to support the trail. Community involvement and volunteerism are the keys to developing a sense of trail stewardship, promoting the trail within the community, encouraging respect for the trail's natural and cultural heritage, and ensuring that local governments support the trail's existence. Through love of place – and of good times – volunteers bring hard work and celebration to the water trail community.

EDUCATION



Through comprehensive trail guides, signage, public outreach, and informative programs, water trail organizations encourage awareness of the natural, cultural, and historical attributes of the trail. Serving as outdoor classrooms, water trails teach through seeing, listening, touching – experiencing.



CONSERVATION



Water trail activities support the conservation of the aquatic ecosystem, contiguous lands, and important cultural artifacts. Trail builders and activists are a respected constituency advocating for resource protection and participating in resource restoration. The water trail community is a watchdog in prevention of environmentally harmful acts, striving to sustain the natural integrity of the trail and preserve the quality of the trail experience.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



A water trail is a network of recreation and educational opportunities. Hiking trails, bikeways, greenways, museums, historic sites, parks, and preserves are connected by water trails creating frontiers for exploration, discovery, and enrichment. The connections build a sense of place and bind citizens in a love for their community. When trail users take advantage of adjacent towns and amenities, they also create economic benefits for the communities.

DIVERSITY



Water trails are non-exclusive. They benefit the able-bodied and the disabled, the young and the old, the disadvantaged and the privileged. Water trails welcome all those that want to respectfully enjoy and appreciate the trail experience. Through shared work and play, tolerance and understanding are fostered. Broad-based participation in trail activities is achieved through affirmative outreach and recruitment.

WELLNESS & WELLBEING



Water trails are wholesome; fresh air and exercise bring fitness and health to trail users. While actively promoting these benefits, water trail users need reliable and accurate safety information and training to responsibly enjoy and appreciate water trails. Safe use requires a commitment to safe design and sound management. Awareness, education, and safety skills training promote the wellness and well-being of all water trail users.

APPENDIX B

Implementation Matrix

*The following pages provide a modified version of an Implementation Matrix and Timeline that will be used for tracking successful outcomes of listed goals. Columns for project and funding status are included in the complete version which can be requested by contacting the PA Water Trail Program Coordinator. The Matrix is a 'living document' that will be updated and modified as appropriate during the 5-year implementation of this Action Plan.

Goal #1 - Program Management & Oversight

STRATEGIC OUTCOME: IMPROVED PROGRAM MANAGEMENT & ADMINISTRATIVE CONSISTENCY & DOCUMENTATION

Task	Primary Organization	Support Organization	Priority Level	Metric
Final versions of key documents have a consistent naming system; include the dates of development or approval, and are saved in a shared folder that is easily accessible	PEC		High	
Create templates for Program documents that have repeated uses	PEC		High	
Develop MOUs among Program partners and Water Trail Managers	PEC	DCNR, PFBC, Managers	High	MOU signed by all Managers by 12/2025
Define "Absentee managers" and "orphaned trails" and create a process for re-engaging or removing a designated trail or manager	PEC	DCNR, PFBC, Managers	Medium	
Create process for identifying Water Trail manager representatives to Exec Comm	PEC	DCNR, PFBC	High	
A process for adopting new policies is defined and implemented	PEC	DCNR, PFBC	Medium	

STRATEGIC OUTCOME: DIVERSE FUNDING MECHANISMS & STRATEGIES FOR PROGRAM SUSTAINABILITY & INNOVATIVE PROGRAMMING

Task	Primary Organization	Support Organization	Priority Level	Metric
Identify opportunities to adjust match requirements and support reasonable match expectations through diverse funding sources	DCNR, PFBC	PEC	Medium	
Share opportunities for new funding sources, and assist with relationship building, and strengthen ties with existing funders	All Executive Partners	Managers	High	
Partners support applications for funding by others through letters of support, etc.	All Executive Partners		High	
Support funding opportunities with specific geographical focus, i.e. pilot projects for potential expansion	All Executive Partners	Managers	High	
Recognize that application timelines and program implementation efforts vary among funding sources and necessitate reasonable accommodations for updates	DCNR, PBFC	Other funders	Medium	
Support the Water Trail Mini Grant program and ensure that it evolves to meet changing needs, costs, priorities	DCNR		High	

STRATEGIC OUTCOME: COORDINATION WITH POWR THAT ENHANCES IMPACTS OF BOTH PROGRAMS

Task	Primary Organization	Support Organization	Priority Level	Metric
Ensure that the Sojourn Mini-grant program furthers the goals of increasing inclusive and equitable access to PA rivers and helps diversify experiences and users	PEC	DCNR, POWR	Medium	
Develop an approach to considering, promoting, recognizing the principles of the Water Trail Program within the Sojourn and River of the Year Programs	PEC	DCNR, POWR	Medium	
Facilitate and celebrate watershed association member involvement in water trail management efforts AND Water Trail Managers in watershed association and events and stewardship efforts	PEC	DCNR, PFBC, POWR	Medium	
Align new Water Trail Program initiatives with relevant and applicable elements of PEC/POWR's Water Strategic Plan	PEC	POWR	Low	

Goal #2 - Water Trail Manager Support & Engagement: Existing & New Managers

STRATEGIC OUTCOME: BENEFITS OF WATER TRAIL DESIGNATION EXTENDED TO MORE WATERWAYS, COMMUNITIES, & USERS

Task	Primary Organization	Support Organization	Priority Level	Metric
Develop and implement a communication strategy to convey the current criteria and benefits of designation	PEC	DCNR, PFBC, Managers	High	
Develop individual plans for designating more Water Trails under the existing criteria	PEC		Medium	At least 2 new trails designated by 12/2026
Develop a list of existing Water Trails where new accesses have been completed or are under construction and implement the existing policy for adding trail miles to designated Water Trails	PEC	Managers	High	
Identify waterways used for recreation, and local entities, which could be added to program in a "tiered" designation approach	PEC	PFBC	High	At least 2 new 'tiered' designations by 12/2026

STRATEGIC OUTCOME: TRAIL MANAGERS ARE SUPPORTED WITH LONG TERM TRAIL MANAGEMENT ISSUES, CONCERNS, & OPPORTUNITIES

Task	Primary Organization	Support Organization	Priority Level	Metric
Administer annual surveys of the Water Trail Managers	PEC	Managers	Medium	
Use results to identify specific solutions and responses to most pressing needs and priorities	PEC	DCNR, PFBC	Medium	
Develop management guides/templates/tools to increase efficiencies	PEC		Low	
Continue membership with River Management Society	PEC		Medium	
Attend relevant meetings and conferences for professional development and program enhancement	PEC	DCNR	Medium	At least 1 mtg/yr

STRATEGIC OUTCOME: CREATE & IMPLEMENT A ROBUST STRATEGY FOR PEER LEARNING & COMMUNICATION TO & AMONG WATER TRAIL MANAGERS

Task	Primary Organization	Support Organization	Priority Level	Metric
Host webinars, regional or topic-based meetings, statewide managers meeting	PEC	ALL	Medium	At least 1 training/yr
Maintain and update the Resources for Managers page	PEC		Medium	
Explore additional communication tools and implement communication plan using them	PEC		Medium	
Serve as conduit and liaison for relevant content from national partners to Pennsylvania's Water Trail Program Community	PEC		Low	

Goal #3 - Water Trail Program Principles Implementation

STRATEGIC OUTCOME: DEIB AS A THEME IS CONSIDERED & APPLIED APPROPRIATELY TO WATER TRAIL MANAGEMENT, OUTREACH/EDUCATION, USE, & MANAGERS’ PRIORITIES

Task	Primary Organization	Support Organization	Priority Level	Metric
Facilitate training/dialogue about DEIB to advance shared objectives and outcomes among Water Trail Managers and partners	PEC	ALL	High	At least 1 Conversation Café or webinar/ yr
Invite leaders of organizations which focus on reconnecting and engaging underrepresented affinity groups to and with outdoor spaces to Water Trail Program events	PEC	ALL	Medium	
Share how other states, water trail systems, and recreational managers are supporting and advancing DEIB	PEC, DCNR, PFBC		Medium	
Create and distribute a Best Practices Approach to Multilingual Communication with river visitors	PEC		High	1 Guide developed by 12/2025
Consider how and whether to promote other opportunities and for inclusive outdoor water-based recreation when the Water Trail Program cannot meet needs	PEC	DCNR, PFBC	Low	
Seek opportunities and funding for unique and innovative ways to connect more diverse populations to Water Trails and water recreation	PEC	DCNR, PFBC	Medium	
Evaluate how findings from the Public Access Research Final Report can inform relevant actions related to DEIB	PEC	DCNR	Low	

STRATEGIC ACTION: FOCUS ON EDUCATION PRINCIPLE: TRAIL SIGNAGE & PUBLIC EDUCATION RELEVANT TO WATER TRAIL ACCESS, USAGE, SAFETY, & ETIQUETTE

Task	Primary Organization	Support Organization	Priority Level	Metric
Prioritize public education messages and priority audiences and implement creative, multimedia communication strategies	PEC	DCNR, PFBC	Medium	
Explore feasibility and impact of a mascot/ character who would be used to brand PA Water Trail	PEC		Low	
Create best practices and/or Program Guidelines for new Water Trail signage (to ensure ease of readability, message consistency, minimum standards for content and design)	PEC	ALL	Medium	1 Guide developed by 12/2026
Evaluate and implement opportunities to "tell diverse, interesting, and 'untold' stories" in addition to basic wayfinding/safety/map information	PEC	ALL	Medium	
Promote wellness, wellbeing, and other health benefits of outdoor recreation including paddling sports.	PEC		Low	
Evaluate how findings from the Public Access Research Final Report can inform relevant actions related to DEIB	PEC	DCNR	Low	

Goal #4 - Program Marketing, Promotion, & Impact

STRATEGIC OUTCOME: ACCURATE INFORMATION ABOUT WATER TRAILS IS EASILY ACCESSIBLE IN ONLINE & WEB-BASED FORMATS

Task	Primary Organization	Support Organization	Priority Level	Metric
Identify key websites, site hosts, and other partners to target to ensure accurate information is more likely to be found by internet searches	PEC, DCNR, PFBC	Managers	Medium	
Review and update agency websites to ensure information accuracy and that maps on all associated site list only officially designated Water Trails	DCNR, PFBC		High	
Ensure accurate and up-to-date information on the www.pawatertrails.org website	PEC		High	
Coordinate with River Management Society to ensure accurate/up to date information on http://www.nationalriversproject.com/	PEC	Managers	Medium	
Develop and maintain accurate data about Water Trails on PA Trail Finder tool and evaluate opportunities for additional online/mobile applications	PEC	Managers, PFBC	High	

STRATEGIC ACTION: WATER TRAIL PROGRAM BRANDED PADDLER INFORMATION, TRAIL PROMOTION, & COMMUNITY OUTREACH RESOURCES ARE CREATED & DISTRIBUTED

Task	Primary Organization	Support Organization	Priority Level	Metric
Embrace opportunities to promote Water Trails in publications such the PFBC Pennsylvania Angler and Boater Magazine	PEC	PFBC, DCNR	High	At least 1 article in "external" publication/ yer
Promote Water Trails at conferences, summits, in PA and beyond	PEC	Manager	High	
Work with PEC communications staff and partners to feature and promote Water Trails and the Program in social media posts and blogs, including paid advertising	PEC		Medium	At least 1 blog on PEC site/yr
Promote specific benefits of Water Trails with targeted messaging to specific stakeholders	PEC	ALL	Medium	
Create a communication strategy & content for outfitters who are asked for suggestions regarding recreational opportunities on PA waterways	PEC		High	1 outreach tool developed by 12/2025
Promote and celebrate events and accomplishments of Water Trail managers	PEC	DCNR, PFBC	Medium	

STRATEGIC OUTCOME: COORDINATED SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS DESIGNED FOR MANAGERS’ USE THAT SHARE IMPORTANT NEWS & CELEBRATE WATER TRAILS, MANAGERS, & PADDLERS

Task	Primary Organization	Support Organization	Priority Level	Metric
Develop a policy, approach, and responsible parties for a well-coordinated PA Water Trail Social Media Campaign platform	PEC	ALL	Medium	
Create a social media campaign to communicate and celebrate various specially recognized days	PEC		Medium	
Evaluate impact of the campaign, ease of use, overall satisfaction and adjust accordingly	PEC		Medium	

STRATEGIC OUTCOME: DEVELOP & IMPLEMENT A METHOD OR APPROACH TO ASSESS, MEASURE, COMMUNICATE, & CELEBRATE THE IMPACT AND SUCCESS OF THE PA WATER TRAIL PROGRAM

Task	Primary Organization	Support Organization	Priority Level	Metric
Secure buy-in and support for a method or approach to assess, measure, communicate, and celebrate the Impact and Success of the PA Water Trail Program	PEC	ALL	Medium	
Evaluate what needs to be measured and develop methods for data collection	PEC	DCNR, PFBC	Medium	
Communicate results effectively/use results to support agency priorities	PEC		Medium	
Identify opportunities for collecting data to measure the economic impact of river-based, Water Trail, paddling activities for trail users, municipalities and for PA	PEC		High	

FIVE YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN

*For the Pennsylvania Water Trail
Program 2025-2029*

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