



**Senate Aging and Youth Committee and Health and Human Services Committee Joint
Hearing
Update on Lyme Disease Task Force Report
Statement by Sara Nicholas
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Chairwoman Brooks, Chairman Haywood, Chairwoman Baker, Chairwoman Schwank, and members of the Senate Aging & Youth and Health & Human Services Committees:

Good morning. My name is Sara Nicholas, and I am the Policy Director for the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today alongside my colleagues at the Department of Health. As a participant on the Task Force on Lyme Disease and Related Tick-Borne Diseases, DCNR looks forward to the conversation on how we can continue advancing recommendations of the September 2015 report.

The Task Force report lists 6 groups that are particularly vulnerable to acquiring tick-borne diseases. Two of these groups include people who work in outdoor occupations, and people who participate in outdoor recreation. In a word, these are DCNR's many field-based staffers, and visitors to our 121 state parks and 10 state forest districts. We think about ticks and tick diseases every day.

There is a delicate balance to the Department's work to prevent tick-related diseases. We want to ensure Pennsylvanians take the appropriate precautions, but we also don't want to scare the public to the point that they stop going outside or coming to our state parks and forests, which would undermine our mission. In order to conserve and sustain Pennsylvania's natural resources for present and future generations' use and enjoyment, we must make sure we are fostering the next generation of conservation stewards.

The report's introduction urges state leaders to take "swift action" in implementing steps to reduce the incidence of Lyme and other tick-borne diseases. Shortly after the report was completed, Secretary Dunn issued a letter to all DCNR staff recommending steps to reduce tick incidents and exposure, and recently published a piece in the monthly online magazine *Resource* that reaches many readers beyond DCNR about how to be aware of and prevent tick-borne diseases.

The Governor's report includes two recommendations that look to DCNR for leadership. The Education and Awareness Workgroup instructed DCNR and other relevant state agencies to implement a public awareness campaign, and develop partnerships to help deliver the message. We coordinate closely with the Pennsylvania Department of Health to make sure our communications are consistent and complementary. DCNR's strong stakeholder relationships with conservation partners have also been very helpful in disseminating our information to the general public. Our state park and forest offices recently distributed signs from the Centers for

Disease Control and distributed thousands of information cards we developed in conjunction with our Get Outdoors PA program partners, including the PA Parks and Forests Foundation, and the PA Lyme Resource Network. Our Communications staff uses informational graphics on our social media pages to reach tens of thousands of people. We publish these throughout the year, and in conjunction with May's Lyme Disease Awareness Month. Sec. Dunn joined Dr. Levine and Sec. McDonnell of DEP this summer for a tick awareness event at Pinchot State Park.

The second recommendation for DCNR is in the report's prevention section and asks us to create state park protocols for prevention. Since the release of the report, DCNR convened an inter-bureau team to determine several areas where we can increase protection for our staff and highlight best practices for the public. Most employees know how to avoid ticks and what to do when they find one, but we have to consider what we can do to encourage them, and visiting public, to take preventive measures. The group identified several effective methods for preventing ticks, including gaiters and clothing treatment, and we provide both chemical and natural repellents to staff upon request. Forestry district offices are installing mirrors and brighter lighting so staff can search for ticks after a day in the field. Several districts have instituted regular spraying of the interior of vehicles.

For the public who visit our state parks and forests, we have provided prevention tips and awareness signage at all 121 state park offices and 20 forest district offices. We have applied for funding to purchase tick chaps and gaiters for visitors to wear on educational outings and nature walks at state parks.

DCNR staff have also taken steps to reduce ticks through habitat management and deer management. The most effective thing we are doing to date is systematically eradicating invasive plants like Japanese barberry and multiflora rose that harbor field mice, one of the critical vectors for spreading ticks. Eliminating these brambly cover plants allows natural predators like hawks and owls to catch mice and reduce their population and concentrations. Tick-related barberry removal in Pennsylvania was featured in a Wisconsin NPR report about the disease this summer.

We are also promoting the use of the Deer Management Assistance Program to provide additional tags in high-deer concentration areas of the state forest and state parks to keep the deer herd in balance with the forest and available forage. Deer are another important vector for the disease. We are discouraging the use of feeding strategies that concentrate deer as well.

DCNR has accelerated the amount of prescribed fire it uses as a management tool for forest health, but is also monitoring whether fire can help knock back tick populations. So far the conclusion seems to be a short-term improvement, but the jury is still out on long-term results.

As we continue to implement the report's recommendations, we hope that additional funds can be directed to the overall effort as the tick population and tick-related incidents continue to grow in Pennsylvania. We look forward to continuing the conversation on how we can better educate our staff and visitors to encourage love of the outdoors in the safest way possible. Thank you for the opportunity to comment today.