

**House Government Committee
Public Hearing on Rockview Property**

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Testimony provided by

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Good day. My name is Bob Steele and I am the Dean of the College of Agricultural Sciences at Penn State University. As the Land Grant University for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences (CAS) has as its primary mandate meeting the research, extension, and education needs of the Commonwealth to serve the entire food and fiber sector of the economy, also including forestry and forest products, wildlife and fisheries, water resources, and tourism and recreation. In meeting these priorities, we need continued access to high quality, contiguous agricultural and forestlands for these educational, research and extension missions in order to continue to serve the citizens of the Commonwealth. Of the roughly 150 4-year institutions of higher education in the Commonwealth, only Penn State has this federal, state, and local mandate. Its array of programs to meet these needs is unique in the Commonwealth and we are an important flagship university in meeting our national priorities in these areas as well. My purpose in providing testimony today is to outline the importance of the proposed Rockview Prison parcel to our future land use and, more specifically, the Spring Creek Canyon corridor. These lands are the classrooms and laboratories for our students, our faculty and our staff. This purchase is important to maintaining an acceptable proximity to our central campus.

Given the location of existing University lands and the extensive common property line the University has with Rockview, it is logical that the University would be very interested in acquiring adjoining Rockview land that lies north of the new Interstate-99 highway, but excluding Spring Creek and adjacent stream sides. The acquisition of the Rockview lands is of such importance to Penn State that we have communicated with the Commonwealth a willingness to pay for the property and we are agreeable to restrictive language in the conveyance documents which ensures that the property will only be used for agricultural and natural resources teaching, research and extension purposes. It is not just about production agriculture. Some of you may recall that, during the administration of Governor Casey, a similar purchase of roughly 200 acres of Rockview property was accomplished. The language requiring the use of that parcel to be for the sole purpose of agricultural research and education was present in that legislation as well.

The University would utilize the crop and forestlands to great benefit for the Commonwealth for teaching, research, and extension programs in agriculture and natural resources and at the same time provide a high degree of stewardship of natural resources on the lands. Penn State has in place a memorandum of agreement with Benner Township whereby joint planning will be accomplished on development of a land use plan to guide us into the future and best use of the

entire parcel to meet the priorities of all entities while insuring that current and state of the art conservation practices are in use in managing this important property. Penn State also has in place a memorandum of agreement with the PA Game Commission to insure that this acreage is available for sportsmen in the Commonwealth for general hunting in keeping with current Game Commission regulations. This is consistent with our longstanding agreements in place to permit hunting on our other Penn State lands. In fact, just last Saturday, for opening day of the pheasant season, the only place in Centre county where the Game Commission stocked pheasants was on Penn State property roughly a mile from the University Park campus. I personally witnessed dozens of hunters, including myself, enjoying the field activities on opening day.

Penn State also welcomes the language in the current draft legislation that would engage the Clearwater Conservancy as formal partners in the development of a formal conservation easement on these parcels so as to **further insure** that these lands would be protected in perpetuity for use as agricultural and natural resource space that would guarantee that these fields, forests, streams, and other flora and fauna would serve as the classrooms and laboratories for our current and future students, faculty and staff. This would also guarantee local input into the ongoing planning process for optimum use of these lands in meeting the priorities of the Commonwealth while also guaranteeing the access of these lands to the citizens of the entire Commonwealth.

Penn State would open these lands that are currently closed for public access but have the potential to be an excellent community resource for educational and passive recreational uses. Further, as the valley extends northeast of State College, significant urbanization/sprawl is occurring. Transfer of this parcel to Penn State, Benner Township and the Fish and Boat Commission is an ideal solution to coordinate environmental stewardship, educational and recreational benefits for the Centre region while meeting Penn State's mandate of addressing the priorities for the entire Commonwealth. And, it would forever guarantee the preservation of this as open space available to all.

The quality of the soil, the topography of the land area and the mix of agricultural and forested land bordering a high quality stream all make this area ideal for demonstrating how agriculture and the stewardship of natural resources are, when done right, indeed compatible practices.

Use of the lands would involve the substantial forested areas and the Spring Creek corridor. These areas are exceptional resources, which will be of great use in Penn State educational and related applied research programs in forestry, wildlife and watershed stewardship. As most are aware, Penn State does not seek direct ownership of what is referred to as the Spring Creek Canyon area; rather, we need open access to this corridor for our research, education and extension programs as well as right of way so as to move from one side of the stream to the other using existing roads. Moreover, the considerable expertise that Penn State scientists could provide will be invaluable in site assessment and long range planning of the Spring Creek Canyon corridor. As stated earlier the memorandum of agreement with Benner Township assures this.

The environmental education value of the Rockview lands and Spring Creek is outstanding. They contain a rich collection of aquatic communities, special geological formations and outstanding plant communities at the very doorstep to the University Park Campus. The nature and positioning of these resources is, in itself, extremely important to the faculty and students of the University. The additional feature of the forest and its resources is that the management is

strongly influenced by its urban setting. Further, the health and productivity of the terrestrial and aquatic resources of this area must be sustained under the influence of rapidly developing urban communities. Management of the forest, wildlife and water resources needs to account for multiple uses, including access by people in the surrounding urban landscape. As noted earlier, Penn State can and does bring substantial internationally renowned scientific expertise to the table when land use discussions regarding this and other areas of the Commonwealth take place.

While the ongoing planning process will be the final determiner of use of these lands, it is easy for me to envision the creation of a Bioenergy Research and Education Program to further the mission of the Penn State Biomass Energy Center, a multidisciplinary endeavor that seeks to address the complete value chain of biomass energy systems. This is without question, a very high priority of the Governor, General Assembly, and citizenry: however, considerable knowledge gaps exist as to what are the best practices for addressing this priority in Pennsylvania. Penn State does not have access to other lands that permit a focus on studies of cropping systems, mixing annual and perennial crops to provide the data necessary for our outreach programs to advise Pennsylvania citizens on options in biomass production. Rockview acreage is sufficient to permit replicated experiments on alternative cropping patterns. Research that answers critical questions on cultivation practices and crop management, biomass handling, nutrient transport in production systems, biomass crop variety trials, carbon sequestration, and the economics of biomass production could be conducted on this property.

Biomass energy has been a blessing and a curse to those concerned with environmental protection. While reducing our reliance on non-renewable sources of energy is positive, there has been legitimate concern about how market forces might drive biomass crop production to marginal lands that have been protected under current farm policy. This is particularly worrisome in the case of annual row crops, such as corn and soybeans. Insufficient data exist to allow recommendations on the compatibility of perennial biomass (such as switchgrass to name but one) production on these marginal lands with environmental concerns such as soil health, water quality, and wildlife habitat.

The Rockview property, bordering on the exceptional habitat of Spring Creek Canyon, provides challenges in land use but also is an opportunity to demonstrate best practices in land use management. A buffer zone suitable to protect the Canyon could be established, and we would instrument this zone such that long term data on nutrient, soil, water, and pollutant movement will become available not only for scientific purposes but also to proactively assess any possible insults to the Canyon property and its geological and biological characteristics. We would implement environmentally sound practices on lands in the Bioenergy Research and Education Program, conducting experiments on the effects of various cropping systems on appropriate sections of the property to develop science-based recommendations for our stakeholders who wish to cultivate biomass crops in Pennsylvania. In the final analysis, the environmental cost of bioenergy must be included in the equation.

Furthermore, the studies that could occur are entirely consistent with the agreement now in place with the Pennsylvania Game Commission to allow access to the property for hunting. As we've done with them before, it is entirely possible that some crop management experiments could partner with the Game Commission to assess the impact of management systems on game habitat quality. Again, I emphasize that this is but one hypothetical use of this land that would address a top priority for Pennsylvania's economy and push toward energy independence.

Some question the ability or commitment of Penn State in being appropriate environmental stewards of these lands. I could list numerous examples but in the interest of time, I will touch on a few and direct the committee toward more information on our website. I will begin by reminding all that Spring Creek currently runs through university property including animal pastures. In cooperation with Clearwater and other entities, we have been leaders in improving up-stream quality of Spring Creek by using current state of the art conservation practices such as stream bank fencing and control of sediment deposition to name just two. This has been a true partnership and attests to our longstanding practice of engaging stakeholders in our research, education, and extension activities.

There is no question that the current state of the art conservation practice in soil tillage is what is commonly referred to as no-till. Penn State scientists have been leaders in the development of no-till best practices for farmers throughout the state. Just a few months ago, the PA Agricultural Statistics office of the PA Department of Agriculture released statewide statistics indicating that no-till practices are now used on **50% of crop acres** in PA, a statistic that demonstrates PA to be a leader nationally. At Penn State, our current tillage is **100% no-till** and has been **100% since 1990**. This is a classic example of university scientists working to fill research gaps that provide new knowledge, that will result in change of attitude that will lead to behavior change, in this case the use of the best available conservation tillage and ultimately improving water quality of our streams and rivers.

Currently, five Penn State farms have received recognition for environmental stewardship, receiving the PA Environmental Agricultural Conservation Certification of Excellence, given by the PA Association of Conservation Districts and the PA Environmental Council. Experts from Penn State have been invaluable in assisting the Commonwealth in the development of sound nutrient management land use practices currently known as Act 38. Research data from Penn State and elsewhere have been critical to providing the scientific basis upon which Commonwealth legislation and policy were developed. As many of you know, legislation mandates that I sit as a voting member of both the State Conservation Commission and the PA Farmland Preservation Board. As a result of this strong and longstanding partnership, Pennsylvania policy has become a model that other states study and emulate. It is important to keep Pennsylvania in the forefront of this evolving dialog and debate by insisting that new policy continues to be adequately grounded in sound science.

Another example currently bringing the international spotlight to Pennsylvania and Penn State is the announcement of the Nobel Peace Prize being awarded jointly to Al Gore and the United Nations international governmental panel on climate change. Five Penn State scientists are in this working group and have been key contributors to its efforts. Just yesterday the university posted a website (www.green.psu.edu) that lists dozens and dozens of other activities within the university and in partnership with the Centre region in insuring environmental stewardship, sustainable community development, reduction in emissions of greenhouse gases, and wise energy use and conservation practices.

What is noticeable in this website and throughout the university is that the student, both undergraduate and graduate, is at the absolute center of all that we do in our research, extension and education activities. It is the essence of the Land Grant ethic-working toward solving today's problems while insuring the workforce and leaders of tomorrow are there to continue to refine our best practices and develop new knowledge so that we are prepared to address

tomorrow's problems, which are ones that none of our crystal balls can predict. All the while we are insuring and, indeed insisting, that our legislation, policies and programs are based on sound science and the best available evidence of the day.

In summary, the use of Rockview lands will be a valuable model system of multiple agricultural, natural resource and forest land uses coordinated in a manner to preserve open land and watersheds in an urbanizing environment and to provide significantly greater access to the surrounding communities for educational and recreational uses.

The transfer of these important lands offers a unique opportunity to provide for improved conservation of important lands in Benner Township and the Centre region, and most importantly, forever protecting these lands from future development while insuring their availability to meet statewide priorities for all 12 million of its citizens. Partnerships with various agencies and groups will be important to provide guidance and mutual support for the programs established on these and other lands. It is a model that transfers well to other parts of the state.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony to you today.