

GovBeat

Best state in America: Pennsylvania, for turning old rails into trails

By **Niraj Chokshi** June 5, 2015

For more than 20 years, hikers have struck out on June's first Saturday to confirm what America's most famous naturalist, John Muir, [noted more than a century ago](#):

"Wildness is a necessity."

The occasion, National Trails Day, celebrates the nation's [more than 230,000 miles of trails](#). It's a network that continues to expand, thanks to a decades-long effort to convert abandoned rail tracks into walkable green spaces.

New York City's High Line – a roughly 1.5-mile elevated trail cutting across a western portion of Manhattan – might be the highest-profile example of a rails-to-trails project. But no state has done more to put old track to good use than Pennsylvania.

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"A lot of the trails in Pennsylvania are world-class trails," says Katie Harris, spokeswoman for the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a D.C.-based nonprofit dedicated to working with and tracking these projects nationally.

Not only has Pennsylvania completed the most rails-to-trails projects – 170, followed by Michigan's 118 – but it has more projects underway than any other state, according to conservancy data. The Keystone State has also converted more miles of track than all but three other states. Michigan has the most, with 2,365 miles of converted trails, followed by Minnesota and Wisconsin. Pennsylvania has turned 1,740 miles of track

into trails.

The idea was born in the mid-1960s in the Midwest. Corridors carved through cities, forests and mountains lay unused by the consolidating railroad industry, so the tracks were removed, and “people just naturally started walking,” the [conservancy says online](#).

Projects have now been implemented in all 50 states and D.C., with more than 22,000 miles of track converted so far. Hundreds of projects underway would add 8,000 miles to that count.

The conservancy is involved in one such effort, dubbed “the Circuit,” which would create a 750-mile network of trails in the Philadelphia region.

“We’re doing work all across the country, but the Circuit’s probably the most relevant example,” Harris says. The project couldn’t exist without the coordination and vision of local officials, advocates, nonprofits and governments.

And the fact that more than 300 miles are already complete is a testament to the dedication that makes Pennsylvania this week’s best state.

Niraj Chokshi is a general assignment reporter for The Washington Post.

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