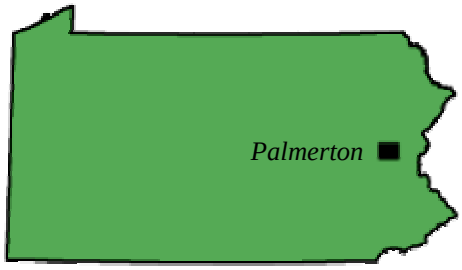
Restoring Our Resources

Pennsylvania's Palmerton Zinc Pile: Blue Mountain, Stony Ridge, Aquashicola Creek and the Lehigh River

Environmental pollution often results in injury to fish, wildlife, and other natural resources. The Department of the Interior, along with State, Tribal, and other Federal partners, represent the public as "Trustees" for these natural resources. Trustees seek to identify the natural resources injured, determine the extent of the injuries, recover damages from the polluters, and plan and carry out natural resource restoration activities. These efforts are possible under the Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Program (NRDAR), whose goal is to restore, replace, or acquire equivalent natural resources injured by pollution. Federal and State Trustees are working toward accomplishing this goal around Palmerton Pennsylvania by engaging in assessment and restoration activities.



Palmerton is located in eastern Pennsylvania adjacent to Aquashicola Creek, Blue Mountain, and the Lehigh River

The Palmerton Area

The Palmerton Zinc Pile Superfund site is located in the Ridge and Valley Province of Carbon, Lehigh, and Northampton Counties, Pennsylvania. The Palmerton valley is bordered by Blue Mountain to the south and Stony Ridge to the north, and is cut through by the Lehigh River to the west of the Borough of Palmerton. Aquashicola Creek drains the majority of the site, flowing in a southwest direction adjacent to the Borough of Palmerton and joining the Lehigh River at the Lehigh Gap.

The National Park Service owns and maintains approximately 800 acres of land that has been acquired to protect the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, which winds along the Blue Mountain ridge and through the associated gaps of the area. The Pennsylvania Game Commission also owns several thousand acres of potentially affected State Game Lands on Blue Mountain. The natural resources in this area have traditionally provided habitat for numerous plant and animal species and opportunities for economic and recreational uses, including timber production, wildlife food plot production, fishing, hunting, hiking, boating, and wildlife viewing.

The Problem

For 90 years, a zinc smelting plant emitted large quantities of metals that were wind-carried and deposited over surrounding areas. Because the high concentrations of metals are toxic to plants, thousands of acres of forestland around the plant were killed. In addition, 32 million tons of smelting waste were placed in a 2.5-mile long "cinder

The Palmerton zinc mill began operations in 1898. By the time primary zinc mill smelting ceased in 1981, thousands of acres of forestland and miles of aquatic habitat had been severely contaminated by metals from the mill.