

## Laurel Highlands footbridge closed

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By John Hayes, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail Bridge -- a vital span over the Pennsylvania Turnpike that connects northern and southern portions of the Laurel Highlands -- has been closed indefinitely by the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

The footbridge was closed following an inspection last week when structural components to the 45-year-old span were found to be rusted, posing safety hazards for hikers, cross-country skiers and snowmobilers, and to motorists passing under the bridge. Barricades are in place blocking passage over the bridge, and a DCNR alert said temporary barriers will be placed in multiple locations to warn trail users of the closure.

Located near the Westmoreland-Somerset county line, the footbridge provides the primary off-road link connecting northern and southern tiers of the Laurel Highlands. There is no detour. Trail users reaching the barricades from the north and south have no alternative to turning around.

"The bridge kind of delineates the northern and southern portions of the Laurel Highlands. [Its closure] basically cuts recreation in the Laurel Highlands in half," said Mike Mumau, operations manager of Laurel Hill, Kooser and Laurel Ridge state parks. "It cuts the snowmobiling, day hiking and backpacking and cross-country skiing."

Rusted pieces of deteriorated metal have been cut away to prevent them from falling to the turnpike below.

"Basically we have an emergency project in place to secure the structure," said Mumau.

DCNR is awaiting results of a structural analysis conducted last week. The survey is expected to include recommendations on future actions. Options could include shoring up the span, removing and replacing it or leaving the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail blocked indefinitely.

The bridge is the property of DCNR, which would likely bear the cost of repairs or possible replacement.

"We regret the inconvenience this closure may cause," said the DCNR alert, "but public safety is our top priority."

For further information or assistance, contact the Laurel Hill State Park Complex at 814-445-7725.

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