



**Interested Party Testimony of Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund
State Biennial Operating Budget - House Bill 166 (*As Introduced*)
Presented to the Ohio House Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural
Resources
April 4, 2019**

Chairman Hoops, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and Members of the Ohio House Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources, thank you for the opportunity to testify before this committee today on the Governor's proposed budget for Fiscal Years 2020-2021, introduced as House Bill (HB) 166. My name is Nathan Johnson, Public Lands Director for the Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund (OECAF).

My testimony today will discuss the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR)'s landholding divisions: Wildlife, Forestry, Parks and Watercraft, and Natural Areas and Preserves.

Governor DeWine's budget proposal for these divisions is excellent. The strong conservation ethic of this administration is evident here, and the Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund fully supports the proposed language. The three main highlights are: state acquisition of the AEP ReCreation Land, a boost for state parks infrastructure modernization and repair, and the reinstatement of funding for our state nature preserves. Other important items include: support for public service forestry, and conservation funding through license and permit fee adjustments.

Public access to the outdoors is vitally important for the health and wellbeing of families, individuals, and society as a whole. Good opportunities for outdoor recreation are a quality of life issue and an economic issue. And, ODNR's landholding divisions are our most important stewards of these opportunities. These divisions need and deserve our support.

Statistics from the Outdoor Industry Association show that, in Ohio, outdoor recreation generates: \$24.3 billion in consumer spending annually, 215,000 direct jobs, \$7.0 billion in wages and salaries, \$1.5 billion in state and local tax revenue. Indeed, nationwide, outdoor recreation is one of the most powerful economic engines in the nation – responsible for \$7.6 billion direct jobs and \$887 billion in consumer spending annually. In other words, outdoor recreation is one of the largest industry sectors in the country. The Governor's budget proposal will help ensure this industry keeps growing in Ohio.

This includes the preservation of public access to the AEP ReCreation Land. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to protect public access on approximately 60,000 contiguous acres. If acquired, the ReCreation Land would be one of only two state parcels of this size and contiguity in Ohio. The Governor's budget includes a \$47 million increase in bond authority to enable state acquisition. The OECAF fully supports this vitally important proposal. Absent state acquisition, 50 years of public access to this property will likely be lost. As a state hungry for public land (Ohio generally falls somewhere between 42nd and 47th in public land acres available per person), we cannot afford to let this opportunity get away. The AEP ReCreation Land boasts 40

miles of horse trails, 10 miles of mountain bike trails, and 28 miles of hiking trails (including the Buckeye Trail), as well as numerous campsites and over 350 lakes and ponds. It boasts some of the best fishing in the state of Ohio. Please support Governor DeWine's funding request on this item.

The reinstatement of the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves (DNAP) is long-overdue. Many of our nature preserves are great hiking destinations. Most importantly, though, they are our most rare, biodiverse, and sensitive places. In short, Ohio's nature preserves are our most special places — the best of the best. These fragile ecosystems have been neglected in the state's budget for too long. They are under constant threat from non-native invasive species invasions. If we neglect these places, we will lose what makes them so special. Reinstating DNAP and providing it with the basic funding it needs is one of the most important things the General Assembly can do for public lands in this state. The OECAF is thrilled that Governor DeWine has made Ohio's nature preserves a priority in this budget. We ask that you please support the Governor's reinstatement of DNAP funding.

State Parks infrastructure repair and modernization gets an important boost in this budget proposal, and this should be high priority for the general assembly. Residents and visitors to the state want and need safe and enjoyable accommodations. Again, outdoor recreation is a huge economic driver in this state. Every dollar we invest in our state parks is an investment our economy and our brand. The OECAF fully supports the Governor's state parks infrastructure funding proposal.

We also fully support license and permit fee adjustments for the Division of Wildlife. Revenues from fishing licenses and hunting permit sales support vital conservation programs and projects in this state. The proposed adjustments have been needed for a long time.

Finally, the OECAF fully supports the Governor's proposed support for public service forestry. The Division of Forestry holds and manages some of the state's most important lands, and offers much-needed support and information to private landowners who want to manage their family forests sustainably and responsibly. Investing in the Division of Forestry means investing in the public and in family forests throughout the state.

In summary, Governor DeWine has proposed a strong conservation budget. Our landholding divisions need every dollar proposed here. That includes the reinstatement of nature preserves funding, an infusion of parks infrastructure funding, and \$47 million in bond authority for state acquisition of the AEP ReCreation Land. The Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund is thrilled to support these budget proposals. We respectfully ask the Committee to do the same.

Thank you, Chairman Hoops, for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer questions at this time.