

**Testimony before the Ohio House Economic and Workforce Development  
Committee in support of H.B 469 to Create the Ohio River Commission of Ohio**

**Eric Thomas, Central Ohio River Business Association**

**Tuesday, December 3, 2024**

Representative and Chairman Brian Lorenz and members of the Economic and Workforce Development Committee.

My name is Eric Thomas. I am the executive director for the **Central Ohio River Business Association (CORBA)**, a nonprofit organization representing maritime industry along the Ohio River throughout southern Ohio and Northern Kentucky. Additionally, I am the general manager of Benchmark River and Rail Terminals, LLC (Benchmark) located at 4820 River Road, Cincinnati, Ohio, 45233. As the name indicates, Benchmark is a third-party terminal engaged in (liquid chemical) distribution via barges on the Ohio River, and via the CSX railroad system.

In these dual capacities, I simultaneously serve on several Ohio Department of Transportation committees including the Ohio Freight Advisory Committee, the Ohio Maritime Plan Steering Committee, and the Access Ohio 2050 Steering Committee.

I am writing in support of the creation of the **Ohio River Commission of Ohio** as proposed by the honorable Representative Robb Blasdel and co-sponsors. Several years ago, a group of like-minded colleagues from up and down the Ohio River, including me, began the work toward the formation of the Ohio River Commission, and we are delighted that the proposed bill has made its way to this committee.

Like those of all terminals and operators on the Ohio River, Benchmark's customers rely heavily on the Ohio River for transportation of the chemicals handled. Benchmark is a leading distributor of farm fertilizer solutions throughout Ohio (as well as Indiana and Kentucky), and handle many other chemicals that are vital to Ohio manufacturers such as The Procter & Gamble Company. Ohio's success in agriculture and the manufacture of many products produced here in Ohio are directly attributed to Ohio's access to the Ohio River.

Ohio is a maritime state and boasts access to two distinct waterway systems via the Great Lakes and the Ohio River. Many states have no access to navigable waterways at all, let alone access to two significant systems. Each of these systems independently provide direct access to global maritime markets via the St. Lawrence Seaway for the lakes, and the Gulf of Mexico for the Ohio River. In fact, Ohio ranks 8<sup>th</sup> among the fifty states in the USA for tons of marine cargos handled. Much attention here in Ohio is directed toward Lake Erie, but recent studies by ODOT show that well over half of Ohio's overall maritime activity including volumes, value, economic impact, jobs, etc., is derived from the Ohio River. And despite its prominence as the 8<sup>th</sup> leading maritime state, Ohio has no central agency to plan, coordinate, or advocate for the maritime industry throughout the state - a condition that is especially acute as relates to the Ohio River.

Recent studies by ODOT and the soon-to-be-released (ODOT) Ohio Maritime Plan will factually demonstrate that the impact and benefits derived from the Ohio River are greatly unknown or misunderstood, and that the Ohio River is sharply underutilized. The records will demonstrate that more than ninety percent of the docks along the Ohio River are privately held or operated. There are several local port authorities along the Ohio River, but only two port authorities with active operations. Statewide support for Ohio River operators is nearly nonexistent. For example, “maritime” funds made available to Ohio’s maritime industry through ODOT’s *Maritime Assistance Program* (MAP), have overwhelmingly funded Lake Erie projects, with only a fraction of those funds reaching businesses on the Ohio River. Without a coordinated economic development plan or strategy for the Ohio River, significant development opportunities – opportunities where investments get made but one time – have, and will continue to end up in competing states that are similarly situated (Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Indiana).

We maintain that the Ohio River is a complex system. The Ohio River traverses nearly 1,000 miles and touches six other states before flowing into the Mississippi River, which itself touches an additional ten states. Each state has its own governing agencies that control activities along each of their respective shorelines. As a federally designated waterway (a literal “marine highway”), the Ohio River is largely operated by the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers and is regulated by the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. DOT, U.S. EPA and the like. Impacts and issues of the Ohio River cannot be processed in a vacuum. There are few *intra*-state movements of cargo within any singular state, and Ohio is no different. Most cargos along the Ohio River are, in fact, *inter*-state, so economic development opportunities require a national or, indeed, a global perspective.

Some states, such as Indiana, have statewide “port” agencies, or even port authorities, whose purpose is to promote the state’s respective port interests. Ohio has no such “port” department. While we compliment the great work of ODOT from purely a transportation perspective, ODOT is not in the economic development business, nor should they be. We feel strongly, therefore, that promotion of the Ohio River is an economic development role, and that statewide coordination through “Development” is appropriate and necessary. With so many federal, state, local, and private agencies involved in Ohio River operations, coordination is key to Ohio’s success. In that regard, with the proper allocation of resources, Ohio can be a leader in the development of a national plan for the Ohio River corridor.

The Ohio River is a differentiator for Ohio and is the envy of many other states competing with Ohio. The Ohio River is already a significant economic contributor to Ohio’s economy and, with proper oversight and coordination, has tremendous capacity for continued growth and for greater contribution to Ohio’s economic success.

I thank you for your time and consideration of the Ohio River Commission of Ohio.