



# BUCKEYE TRAIL ASSOCIATION, INC.

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## Testimony before the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee

### RE House Bill 33

May 3, 2023

Mr. Chairman, Senator Tim Schaffer, and members of the Committee, my name is Andrew Bashaw. I am the Executive Director of the **Buckeye Trail Association (BTA)**, the leader in building, maintaining, protecting, and promoting Ohio's 1,400+ mile Buckeye Trail (BT) since 1959, and an organization representative of the **Ohio Trails Partnership (OTP)**, which is a collaboration of non-motorized trail users including hikers, horsemen, bikers and paddlers. Collectively OTP speaks on behalf of over 10,000 members and the millions of users of all of Ohio's trail treads. I participate with the Ohio Legislative Trails Caucus, and I serve on the Clean Ohio Trails Fund Advisory Board. Along with others from the OTP, I serve on the Advisory Team to Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) that which created the 2019 Ohio Trails Vision/Plan that provides agreed upon recommendations between trail management agencies and Ohio's trail users and advocates that we are assisting with implementing. From these experiences I know and value the important role that ODNR plays in administering a statewide network of trails and public lands for all our benefit, including significant recreational, health and well-being, and economic benefits.

I am here today to speak to the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee concerning House Bill 33 which establishes operating appropriations for fiscal years 2024 - 2025. When this bill came out of the House, ODNR's well-considered proposed budget was not approved - no increase from the FY2022-2023 budget is included in the bill. The failure to include the requested ODNR funding results in a shortfall of \$27,536,130 for FY24 and \$27,536,129 for FY25 while demand for more and improved outdoor recreation opportunities continues to grow even after exponential increases due to Covid 19. Since ODNR's budget was flat funded, ODNR will experience a budget reduction due to the impact of inflation (about 5%) when making purchases and the impact of mandated contractual pay raises without increased funding. The reduction to ODNR's budget -- if approved -- would leave ODNR to manage capital funding for a number of needed projects with an insufficient operating budget to implement and maintain those improvements to our State recreational assets.

ODNR manages the largest portion of Ohio's 5,000 miles of public trails. The BTA has been very active within the past five years urging for additional funding for ODNR's important mission. We feel strongly that HB 33 should be rejected or changed to reinstate ODNR's originally proposed budget, adding back into the operating budget the \$54 million over FY24-25 to provide ODNR the needed operating funds to do its job and move our statewide trail system forward to meet the needs of all Ohioans.

Ohio's Buckeye Trail is a good example of a destination for trail enthusiasts, which dramatically increased and sustained after the Covid 19 pandemic. Ohioans and our visitors seek out the BT in ODNR's Hocking Hills State Park, Little Miami Scenic Trail, Headlands Dunes State Nature Preserve, and many more to enjoy Ohio's scenic beauty and the diversity of Ohio's environment. The combined benefits to, and economic impact of, millions of trail enthusiasts on the Buckeye Trail alone is staggering. Reducing ODNR's budget has a negative impact on partners operations as well, less ODNR assistance in managing

our statewide network equates to a greater need for volunteers to refocus their priorities to additional upkeep of public trails on ODNR property.

We are asking not only that ODNR's operating budget request be approved but that the operating budget include an additional \$2,000,000 spread over FY24-25 for Tourism Ohio to fund an economic impact study concerning Ohio trail usage to assist all the public and private partnerships to leverage even more investment in access and maintenance to our public lands.

Not only are there substantial economic benefits from ODNR's trails but there are equally important benefits to societal health and wellness, and to the education of our youth. Providing and encouraging outdoor trail activity promotes cardiovascular fitness. And by the way, it also promotes emotional and mental wellbeing. Not only is outdoor exercise good for the heart, lungs and mind, it is also helpful to attain Ohio's educational goals. Study after study shows that students with access to the outdoor activity made available through ODNR's good works produces better academic performance and improved behaviors.

To deliver these benefits, the ODNR properties require funding for regular maintenance, improvements, and supervision. Trails and all other recreation facilities require regular maintenance and improvement. If ODNR's properties are not maintained user participation will decrease, trail users will choose neighboring states to visit more often, and maintenance costs will only increase. There are physical risks to outdoor recreation and ODNR is obligated to supervise the use of its properties. If the properties are not supervised and patrolled, risks increase for injury to users whether from failed trail features and misuse. Response times in the event of an incident are just as critical within the properties as on our cities' streets. The operating budget reductions in the current language of HB 33 would reduce funding for law enforcement on ODNR properties by close to \$10M in FY24 and in FY25.

Not only does ODNR provide the most significant access to the outdoors for all Ohioans, but also some of Ohio's largest educational and scientific projects. We are facing a loss of reforestation (a projected 75,000 seedling shortfall by FY25), loss of Service Foresters advising private landowners, Indian Lake vegetation investigation and management, Nature Preserve operations management, public information specialists, permanent naturalist resource technicians, college interns, interpretative staffing, and rare plant monitoring – all of which provide science-based educational opportunities to Ohio schools and the general public.

Ohio is 47<sup>th</sup> of 50 states in the amount of public lands per capita. For this reason, Ohio's trails are in high demand to meet all our daily needs for enjoying the outdoors, health and well-being. A large sector of Ohio's economy, and Ohioans livelihoods, are directly and indirectly impacted by our outdoor recreation economy that depends on our state trail network, it's maintenance and further development. Investing in ODNR's good work is one of the most cost effective ways to serve Ohioans well. I urge that the Committee reject HB 33 as written and take action to include ODNR funding to the level requested for FY24-FY25.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue,



Andrew Bashaw

Executive Director, Buckeye Trail Association