

Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Landis and Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and all members of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding House Bill 33 as a long-standing Ohio Boatowner. My name is **Dennis Mintus**, and I'm proud to say I have spent a lifetime boating on Ohio's waterways. My background in boating includes: a member of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary; Past Commodore of Inter-Lake Yachting Association that includes over 150 boating clubs; I have been a teacher of sailing at Kent State University teaching sailing; I am a US Coast Guard Licensed Captain and I'm currently serving as Chair of the Ohio Waterways Safety Council.

Let me share some awesome facts about how important boating is to our State. Ohio ranks 6th the nation with more than 653,000 registered watercrafts. The Ohio boating industry provides more than 20,000 good paying jobs, and indirectly impacts another 25,400. AND, overall, Ohio boating has a known statewide annual economic impact of 6.4 Billion dollars!

Happily, the number has grown to new heights in the post-covid era. But that also means we have many new people operating watercraft with limited knowledge and skills. These new users put increased burdens on ODNR officers who teach Ohio Boater Education Classes while also performing on-water patrols, safety inspections and, yes, even rescues when needed.

In addition to our abundant lakes and rivers, Ohio also now has over 1000 miles of Water Trails for non-powered paddle craft users. These ever-expanding new areas have significantly increased what ODNR officers must cover. Some waters are extremely congested, like the Cuyahoga River for example, which sees multiple users from commercial ships to pleasure craft to small paddle craft. This congestion on the Cuyahoga River is made even worse by the Norfolk Southern Railroad Bridge at the river's mouth that blocks traffic for long periods.

Ohio has over 325 marinas in our state, with 260 on Lake Erie. Because of our successful boating programs, Ohio receives about 6 million dollars a year from the US Coast Guard as Recreational Boating Grants. But in order to receive this money we must meet certain metrics set by the Coast Guard. These include Boat Safety Inspections, Boater Education programs and the all-important on-water Patrols.

Accordingly, if you do not budget the full amount needed for law enforcement we risk losing these 6 million dollars in Coast Guard Grant each year.

Now, if you're wondering whether a stronger officer presence on our waterways will mean that your constituent's will be harassed by them, let me say that's simply isn't so. Ohio has a "Boater Freedom Act" in which officers cannot stop a boat without probable cause. I also ask you to recognize that in 2010 we had more than 200 Natural Resource Officers covering Parks and Waterways . . . now we have only about 160 officers to serve more area than ever before.

I also ask you to acknowledge that our officers are very specialized in training and skills handling watercraft. Moreover, these officers work the most when we Ohioan's want to be out on the water. . . it's never a 9-5 weekday job. They patrol into the evenings and all weekend. And, frankly, it is hard to keep them as their pay scale is lower than other law enforcement agencies offer in most areas.

In addition, it is Not uncommon to find them in aging equipment, like vehicles with over 150k miles and Patrol Boats that are well-past their life expectancy and need replacement.

Officers must contend with GPS and Sonar electronic equipment that's well over 10 years old with its old technology. Some of this equipment will soon be no longer supported by the manufacture. This electronic sonar equipment is paramount to speedy responses to emergencies and recovery of drowning victims. Unfortunately slow recoveries can be very painful situation made worse for families and friends.

In conclusion, I am here to urge that funding be restored and provided to the level that Parks and Watercraft has requested. We must think about how we Ohioans continue to grow the use of our Waterways. We must recognize with inflationary pressures alone, even if the budget stays at the same it falls short of the clearly documented need for service to Ohioans.

Yes, boating in Ohio is a Wave of Enjoyment and Employment. We ask you for your full support. Thank you and I'll be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Dennis Mintus

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