

## 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 Tom Green. In addition to being a Dayton lawyer, I am an avid enthusiast for Ohio's trails. By way of background, I am a Director and Past-President of the **Ohio Horseman's Council (OHC)**, which is the largest equine trail user group in Ohio, and the Secretary/Treasurer of the **Ohio Trails Partnership (OTP)**, which is a consortium of the non-motorized trail users including horsemen, hikers, 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 have participated with the Ohio Legislative Trails Caucus – perhaps some of you are members. I volunteer on the Clean Ohio Trails Fund. I serve on the Advisory Committee which created the Ohio Trails Vision. Consequently, I know something about recreational trail use in Ohio and the importance of ODNR.

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, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) 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. In fact, the ODNR budget was flat funded, meaning that ODNR must additionally absorb a silent budget reduction because of the impact of inflation (about 5%) when purchasing goods, materials, and supplies, and also because of the impact of contractual pay raises mandated during this budget period - but for which there is no funding. The reductions or omissions from the requested budget – if approved – would leave ODNR in the untenable position of having capital funding for a number of needed projects but insufficient operating budget to effectuate those improvements to our State recreational areas.

What does this mean to the user groups which rely on ODNR for recreational outdoor opportunities?

The largest equine, hiking, biking and water trail systems in Ohio are within the ODNR divisions – Parks & Watercraft, Forestry and Natural Areas & Preserves. We are blessed with some 5,000 miles of trails spreading across the state. In 2019, the DeWine administration worked with ODNR Director Mary Mertz and a 24-member volunteer group to create the *Ohio Trails Vision*, a comprehensive discussion and catalogue of Ohio's trails. If you have not read that publication, I urge you to do so. The economic impact of Ohio's trails is huge – many millions of dollars when taking into consideration the user fees, equipment purchases, transportation, housing, retail, food and supplies consumed by those users - real money being spent in Ohio. OTP has been very active within the past five years urging additional funding be provided for ODNR's mission. We have refocused our advocacy for the moment to urge rejection of HB 33 as it stands and to add back into the operating budget the \$54 million over FY24-25 to provide ODNR the needed operating funds to do its job.

Ohio is a destination for trail enthusiasts. People come here to enjoy Ohio's scenic beauty and the diversity of Ohio's environment. For example, just among the horse community, ODNR's Hocking Hills State Park is a nationally known trail riding destination, ranked among the top ten in the country. That translates to many, many users who are spending their money in Ohio, generating sales tax and income tax - which funds the GRF. That is why 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.

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 wear out. Camping amenities wear out. Parking areas wear out. If ODNR's properties are not maintained user participation will fall off. Sister states Indiana, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania are all competing for the recreational users and their dollars. There are 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 or even from bad actors. Response times in the event of an incident are just as critical within the properties as on our cities' streets. The operating budget reductions forced by the current language of HB 33 would reduce funding for law enforcement on ODNR properties by close to \$10M in FY24 and in FY25. That translates to fewer and fewer personnel. As an example, staffing around Lake Erie both for safety purposes and educational purposes will decline. New projects are a non-starter.

Not only does ODNR provide Ohio's largest playgrounds 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 forest management advisors to private landowners, Indian Lake vegetation investigation and management, Preserves 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 has been fortunate. Its revenues are sound and increasing. Its people are devoted users of Ohio's recreational spaces. It would be a real shame to impair ODNR's good works. 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.