



May 8, 2023

Senator Tim Schaffer  
Chair, Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee  
The Ohio Senate 135th General Assembly  
Senate Building, 1 Capitol Square, 1st Floor, 137  
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Dear Chairman Schaffer and Members of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this written testimony on behalf of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' Division of Natural Areas and Preserves. The [Natural Areas Association \(NAA\)](#) serves practitioners responsible for the ecological resilience and protection of natural areas across North America. As the current Executive Director of NAA, and a former board member for the organization since 2003, I have personally witnessed the evolution of the Ohio State natural areas program. During this time, I have seen Ohio's state natural areas be held up as one of the leading examples of a quality natural areas management; observed the program's decline due to lack of resources; and cheered during the past four years as Ohio made huge strides to restore valuable native biodiversity. It has been gratifying to see the amazing work being done on the ground and to see Ohio re-establish its role as a respected state natural areas program.

As a nonprofit executive, I appreciate the demands of budgets and the need to balance priorities; however, I am also a trained field ecologist. As an ecologist, I understand the incredible importance of protecting a region's native biodiversity and the tremendous effort involved in that endeavor. It is not easy, but it is vital, particularly as our generation has been charged with the protection of natural resources in the face of environmental impacts that continue to grow in severity. In modern society, where we can easily replace so many things, that is not necessarily true in nature, where species, and even entire ecosystems, if lost, are gone forever. I am writing today to implore the committee to fully consider and understand the value of protecting natural areas and Ohio's native biodiversity through the important work of the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves. I respectfully ask that the Committee restore the general revenue funding as proposed by Governor DeWine in the Ohio FY 2024-2025 operating budget.

As the director of an organization that serves to promote the use and sharing of science-based management strategies and natural resource preservation efforts across the nation, I am acutely aware of the herculean efforts needed to protect our nation's most delicate landscapes from degradation and permanent loss due to poorly planned development and the ever-increasing impact of non-native invasive species. Ohio has an amazing diversity of habitats protected within the preserve system including many that are globally rare such as the Great Lakes alvar communities, twig rush – wire grass prairies in northwest Ohio and xeric limestone prairies in the southern part of the state. There are also regionally and locally significant habitats such as glacial relic bogs and fens, unique Lake Erie coastal dunes and mature and old growth forest remnants scattered throughout the state. Many of these habitats are the home for state and federally listed rare and endangered species. In fact, 5 of the 6 federally listed plant species in Ohio are protected within Ohio Nature Preserves.

As I understand, the budget increase that had been proposed for the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves was to be used to increase efforts in two primary areas: Non-native invasive species control and management and public outreach efforts. These are critical needs. It has been asserted that the largest threat to native biodiversity and a leading cause of plant species extinctions is the impact of non-native invasive species. Left unmanaged, invasive species will outcompete most native species to the point of exclusion which often has a cascading effect on entire ecosystems. As the number



and variety of invasive species continues to increase across our landscapes, the potential impact on natural ecological systems becomes disastrous. Well trained natural resource management practitioners using the most up to date science-based solutions are critical to ensuring imperiled species and ecological associations persist for the future.

And, as important as these management efforts are to the survival of species and habitats, natural areas cannot survive in a vacuum of government effort. Public outreach is critical to the success of any such preservation work. Perhaps more now than ever, we need to educate young people in new and innovative ways to share the importance of natural area preservation. We need to engage underserved communities and incorporate the views and ideas of all constituents, embrace cultural diversity, and ensure that future management of preserved lands is planned in a sustainable and equitable manner. Nature Preserves serve as living classrooms. Areas where citizens can appreciate nature and learn from it. This outreach also serves Ohio residents across the state, conveying future career opportunities as well as nature's ability to provide real and meaningful physical and mental health benefits regardless of vocation.

Now is not the time to step back from or shy away from the protection of natural resources but a time to embrace the multitude of benefits we derive from maintaining these protected areas. Natural Areas programs across the nation serve numerous critical functions. Nature preserves tell a story. A story that connects us all with our past, grounds us in our present, and provides a glimpse of our future. This is an ever-unfolding story describing the heritage of all those that call a place home. It is our opportunity to now establish our own legacy – a legacy of stewardship of these lands.

I leave you with the words of George B Fell, founding member of the NAA in 1974:

"We who work in the natural areas preservation movement have a noble cause. Almost nobody before us had seen the need or been able to set aside natural areas. And those that follow will no longer have the chance. They will only be able to care for what we leave them." — George B. Fell

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Ohio Division of Natural Areas and Preserves.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lisa L. Smith", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

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