

**Testimony before the Ohio Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
in support of S.B. 286 to Create the Ohio River Commission of Ohio**

Robert Naylor, Jefferson County Port Authority

Tuesday, November 12, 2024

Senator Schaffer and members of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee.

My name is Robert Naylor and I serve as the executive director for the Jefferson County Port Authority, a Political Subdivision formed and existing under Chapter 4582 of the Ohio Revised Code ("Port Authority"). The Port Authority serves as the Jefferson County's comprehensive economic development agency, representing all local communities in site improvement and marketing strategies, corporate site selection, and local business expansion programs.

The Port Authority is submitting this written testimony in support of the creation of the Ohio River Commission of Ohio as proposed by the honorable Senator Wilkin and his co-sponsors. In 2019, a group of river-focused stakeholders met to determine how promote the economic generator that is the Ohio River. The Ohio River spans over 450 miles along Ohio's eastern and southern borders and generated \$26.5 billion in economic impact in 2019 through 135 different marine terminals. Supporting over 100,000 jobs, over 40 million tons of cargo are transported annually to and from Ohio, anchored by the nation's top three inland port statistical areas: the Mid-Ohio Valley Port, the Port of Huntington Tristate, and the Ports of Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky. These three inland port statistical areas run along the Ohio River from Hamilton County to Columbiana County.

Ohio boasts access to two distinct, significant waterway systems. Both of these systems independently provide direct access to global maritime markets via the St. Lawrence Seaway and the Gulf of Mexico. While Lake Erie benefits from the Lake Erie Commission, Ohio has no central agency to plan, coordinate, or advocate for the maritime industry along the Ohio River and the counties it touches and effects. Ohio ranks 8th among the fifty states in the nation for tons of cargo handled and recent ODOT studies clearly demonstrate that well over half of Ohio's maritime activity including volumes, value, economic impact, and job creation and retention is derived from the Ohio River.

Previous efforts to promote the Ohio River Commission of Ohio were not included in state's Fiscal Year 2023 - 2024 biennium budget. Earlier this year, our coalition gained the support of Representatives Monica Robb Blasdel and Don Jones, sponsors of House Bill 469, and Senator Shane Wilkin, sponsor of Senate Bill 286. Now that this legislation has been introduced, it is time to act. As this committee understands, Ohio's agriculture success is directly attributed to its access to the Ohio River.

Recent studies by ODOT and the soon-to-be-released (ODOT) Ohio Maritime Plan will show the impact and benefits derived from the Ohio River are greatly unknown or misunderstood, and greatly underutilized. Over the years, "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.

The Ohio River traverses nearly 1,000 miles and touches six other states before dumping into the Mississippi River, which itself touches an additional ten states. Each state has its own governance agencies and activities along each of their respective shorelines. As a federally designated waterway (a literal "marine highway"), the Ohio River is "operated" by the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers and is regulated by the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. EPA and the like. Impacts and issues of the Ohio River cannot be processed in a vacuum. There are few intrastate movements of cargo within any singular state, and Ohio is no different. Most cargos along the Ohio River are interstate, so economic development opportunities require a regional, national, and global perspective.

In a border county such as Jefferson County, the potential regional impact of the Ohio River Commission of Ohio to enable outreach to the neighboring states of Pennsylvania and West Virginia presents a potential catalytic economic opportunity for the Jefferson County, the surrounding region and Ohio.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,



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