

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

**Jesse Roush, Southeastern Ohio Port Authority**

**Tuesday, November 12, 2024**

Senator Schaffer and Members of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee:

My name is Jesse Roush, and I am the executive director of the **Southeastern Ohio Port Authority (SeOPA)**. SeOPA is the lead economic development agency in Washington County, which boasts the most riverfront in all of Ohio. Our county seat, Marietta, is well known as a quaint “little river town” and has received \$9.4 million in Appalachian Community Grant Program funds as part of the Ohio’s Wonderful Waterways Initiative. With 55 miles of access to the Ohio River, Washington County’s economy is intrinsically tied to this vital marine highway.

I am writing in support of the creation of the **Ohio River Commission of Ohio (ORCO)** as proposed by the Honorable Senator Wilkin and his co-sponsors. Several years ago, a group of like-minded colleagues representing the entire Ohio River Valley, from Hamilton to Columbiana County, began advocating for the creation of the Ohio River Commission. Today, we are grateful for the opportunity to continue this important conversation with the esteemed members of this committee.

In 2021, SeOPA began its due diligence for the acquisition of the AMP-Ohio Gorsuch Site, a 50-acre property located on the Ohio River with the potential to become a true road-river-rail port facility. During this process, I discovered that Ohio’s only specific maritime funding program, the Maritime Assistance Program through ODOT, is currently structured in a way that excludes much of the Ohio River. The absence of an organized and official voice, such as the proposed Ohio River Commission, has resulted in legislation that disproportionately favors Lake Erie, stalling development opportunities along the Ohio River.

While Ohio may not traditionally be thought of as a maritime state, it ranks 8th among all 50 U.S. states for tons of cargo handled. *Ohio is, in fact, a maritime state.* Presently, most attention to maritime activity is directed toward Lake Erie. However, recent studies by ODOT indicate that well over half of Ohio’s maritime activity—including cargo volumes, economic impact, and job creation—originates from the Ohio River. Despite the Ohio River’s prominence, Ohio lacks a central agency to plan, coordinate, or advocate for the state’s maritime industry, a gap that significantly hinders development along the river.

Advocates of ORCO and the Ohio River firmly believe that promoting the river represents a strategic economic development initiative, and statewide coordination is both appropriate and necessary. The mighty Ohio River provides Ohio with a significant competitive advantage in a highly competitive global marketplace. With proper governance and coordination, the Ohio River has immense growth potential, which can further propel Ohio’s economic success.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration of the Ohio River Commission.



Jesse C. Roush, Executive Director  
Southeastern Ohio Port Authority