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Interested Party Testimony
Senate Finance Committee – Agriculture & Natural Resources
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Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, Senator Gavarone who represents me in District 2, and all members of this Senate Finance Committee, it is my pleasure to be here this morning to provide my perspective on the need to maintain strong funding for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR).

I am here representing Shores & Islands Ohio, a destination marketing partnership between the Erie and Ottawa County Convention & Visitors Bureaus responsible for promoting that region of Ohio. Tourism is a major component of the economy in these two counties with approximately 11 million visits annually that generate \$2.6 billion in tourism related impact, support over 14,000 jobs, and contribute \$354 million in tax dollars.

In presenting tourism economic impact, I often speak on behalf of my counterparts in the six other counties that border Lake Erie in Ohio: Lucas, Sandusky, Lorain, Cuyahoga, Lake, and Ashtabula. If we add the tourism-related impact from these counties to Erie and Ottawa, the numbers jump to \$17.2 billion in annual spending supporting over 126,000 jobs and generating \$2.4 billion in taxes. A testament to the power of Lake Erie to draw tourism and associated economic impact to the state.

I reference these statistics because the various divisions of ODNR are vitally important to our region and all of Ohio in developing and maintaining sites and programs that provide outdoor recreation opportunities, protect our valuable natural resources, and help drive the economic impact mentioned above.

To cite some specific examples related to the region I represent: I'm proud to say that we have eight Ohio State Parks in the Shores & Islands Ohio counties, five of which are on islands. These parks attract millions of visits annually, a combination of Ohioans and out-of-state guests. Many out-of-state guests are surprised to learn it is free to enter the parks, which is not always the case as one travels across the country. These parks offer a wide range of activities that in our area includes primitive and RV camping, lighthouses, beaches, boating, fishing, birding, nature trails, and the list goes on.

On a side note, I'd like to point out that in partnership with ODNR's Division of Parks & Watercraft, we have a webcam installed at Marblehead Lighthouse State Park showing a view of the lighthouse and lake. This is accessible from the home page of our website: shoresandislands.com and is one of the most popular pages on our site.

My staff and I are excited to be able to promote several ODNR-managed assets that have or will be coming online in our region: the renovated Magee Marsh Visitors Center, the enhancements and accessibility additions at Kelleys Island's Glacial Grooves, and state-of-the-art fish cleaning stations in Huron and Marblehead. These projects and many others across the state will be popular and highly-needed additions, and all come with the need for ongoing management and maintenance.

Last week this committee heard testimony from charter fishing captain Peg VanVleet about the many ways that ODNR helps promote and protect what is the most productive sport fishery on all the Great Lakes. Others have talked with you about the significant economic impact and recreational opportunities that boating contributes to the state. Of course, H2Ohio and the work that ODNR does to implement and monitor this program is crucial to sustaining these and other recreational activities that provide benefit to so many Ohioans and guests.

The benefits I mention were particularly front and center a few years ago when we were all dealing with Covid. Outdoor recreation supported by ODNR's work "saved the day" for Ohio's tourism industry as people sought the outdoors in record numbers.

These are just some of the ways that ODNR's assets and work provide direct benefit to those who promote tourism in Ohio, and why it's very concerning that their general revenue fund (GRF) budget has been flat-funded, resulting in a significant reduction when accounting for inflation and contractual pay raises. I'm told that all but two of ODNR's GRF lines were reduced or eliminated in the recently passed House budget. All in all, ODNR's funding was reduced by over \$27 million in fiscal years 2024 and 2025.

This at a time when we continue to see record numbers of Ohioans and out-of-state guests utilizing the assets and services that ODNR manages and their budget supports. Also, at a time when Ohio has launched a refreshed "Heart of it All" brand and campaign that promotes the state as not only a great place to visit, but also to live and work.

Ohio has seen a significant amount of new business attraction in recent years, which is a great story. However, with that success comes the ongoing need for attracting a workforce to satisfy the demand. Studies show that one of the key ingredients to talent attraction and relocation is quality of life, and the assets that ODNR manages certainly elevate our quality of life. I'm sure all of us know people who moved to Ohio partly or solely because of the natural assets one can find here. If we are to continue enjoying these things ourselves, and continue benefitting from their ability to draw others to the state, we must continue to provide strong funding to ODNR.

For all the reasons I've mentioned and many more, I urge this committee to recommend restoring and, ideally, increasing ODNR's FY '24-'25 GRF allocation so the department can continue providing quality experiences and significant economic benefit for this great state. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony; I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.