

Statement from

Steve Fleegal, Executive Director, Appalachia Ohio Alliance

Chairman Dolan and members of the Finance Committee, my name is Steve Fleegal and I am the Executive Director of Appalachia Ohio Alliance (AOA), a nonprofit land and water conservation trust. We assist landowners in placing perpetual protection on their significant natural properties with a focus on protecting riparian corridors and water quality. To date, we have helped to conserve over 15,000 acres in 21 central and southeast Ohio counties.

Appalachia Ohio Alliance owns 100 properties and holds conservation easements on an additional 66 private lands. Our properties conserve many excellent examples of Ohio's rich and diverse natural history – mature, old growth woodlands, high quality wetlands, and special geologic features – as well as heritage sites and working farms.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' Division of Natural Areas and Preserves – one of our most significant partners in our conservation efforts.

I ask that you please restore the General Revenue Funding for the Natural Areas Program that was submitted in Governor DeWine's proposed operating budget but removed in the house version of HB33.

Much of our conservation success results from AOA's extensive collaboration with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, which has been very helpful with both conservation site identification and acquisition, as well as expertise in land management from the many professionals at ODNR. The Division of Natural Areas and Preserves has partnered with AOA to place state conservation easements on properties and have dedicated AOA protected sites as State Nature Preserves – the highest level of natural resource protection currently available for lands in Ohio.

A couple of examples of this shared mission include:

Bartley Preserve in Pickaway County. The Division of Natural Areas and Preserves holds a state conservation easement on this land as an important remnant of what was at one time a widespread area of prairie and wetlands in what was known as the Pickaway Plains. This 116-acre site which honors Circleville farmer-naturalist Floyd Bartley, is home to five rare species of plants and also protects an Adena period mound which is on the National Register of Historic Places and is the third largest in Pickaway County.

Kleinmaier Preserve in Fairfield County. A spectacular 32-acre site donated to AOA that is dedicated as a State Nature Preserve and is adjacent to the Rhododendron Cove and Wahkeena State Nature Preserves. This site contains state significant plant populations including a large concentration of the state listed Great Rhododendron and several specimens of Flame Azalea, as well as noteworthy examples of exposed Blackhand sandstone cliffs characteristic of the Hocking Hills and native habitation sites.

We are presently working with the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves on numerous additional acquisition, conservation and restoration projects in several key ecological regions of Ohio including sites in Madison, Champaign, Fairfield, Hocking, Pickaway, Vinton, Morrow, Vinton and Union Counties.

Many of our priority conservation project areas overlap with preservation priorities within the Division of Natural Areas and preserves including protection of exceptional ecology and geology in the Hocking Hills Region and Hocking River Valley and along high-quality river corridors such as the Big and Little Darby Creeks in Pickaway and Madison Counties. Staff at DNAP have been extraordinarily helpful throughout our service area, furnishing advice on management and restoration efforts as well as providing outdoor recreational and educational opportunities such as canoe floats, guided hikes and interpretive talks.

AOA greatly values our relationship and collaborations with the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves. With so many of Ohio's native species and special natural areas at risk in a rapidly changing world, we were happy to learn of the increase in the GRF budget that was included in Governor DeWine's proposed fiscal year 24-25 operating budget. A continuation of the support that this small but exceptionally important division has received is crucial for conservation of Ohio's natural resources.

We were disappointed to learn that this modest increase in funding has been removed in the House passed version of the budget. Of greatest concern is that without the budget increase, vacant staff positions will need to be left unfilled which will decrease the amount of non-native invasive species management that can be accomplished, and any additional educational and interpretive efforts will not be realized.

I am respectfully requesting that you Chairman Dolan, and the Finance Committee see fit to restore these funds so that the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves can continue the important work that they do for all Ohioans and that we can continue to partner with them on conservation, recreation and education efforts.

Thank you for your time and consideration in this request. I would be more than happy to answer any questions that you may have at this time.