

**Ohio Senate
Finance Committee
Interested Party Testimony
Ohio House Bill 33**

*Mary Turocy, The Nature Conservancy in Ohio
May 18, 2023*

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and Honorable Members of the Senate Finance Committee, I am Mary Turocy, Director of Policy and Government Relations for The Nature Conservancy in Ohio. We appreciate your consideration of our testimony for Ohio House Bill 33, Ohio's FY24-25 Main Operating Budget.

The Nature Conservancy is a global organization with chapters in all 50 states and projects in over 70 countries. We are a non-partisan, science-based organization that seeks to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. We work collaboratively with businesses, farmers, sportsmen groups, government, and local communities to develop pragmatic solutions to conservation challenges, including land conservation, water quality, and air pollution. We have been working in Ohio for over 70 years, and more than 65,000 Ohioans are Nature Conservancy supporters. We own and manage over 20,000 acres of nature preserves throughout the state. We invite any of you to visit our open preserves and enjoy the unique places that make Ohio a great place to live, work and play. We also invite you to visit our work with farmers in northwest Ohio to see first-hand how conservation and agriculture work together to address the problems in the western Lake Erie basin.

The Nature Conservancy in Ohio thanks the Governor and the House for including funding for the critical H2Ohio program to improve drinking water, water infrastructure and support the overall health of Ohio's waterways. We highly value all three legs of H2Ohio and are especially appreciative of the support for natural solutions, such as wetland restoration, which create habitat while delivering lasting benefits for Ohio's water. As public and private partners work towards a data-driven approach to restore and improve Ohio's rivers and river areas around the state, we applaud the investments in the H2Ohio program overall and the proposed development of the H2Ohio Rivers Initiative in particular.

Ohioans want to enjoy our beautiful natural resources and Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) funding is essential to manage these resources safely and sustainably. The House Passed version of the budget is concerning for the significant reduction in support for ODNR. By flat funding the ODNR budget over the biennium, cuts to programs and staffing will become necessary due to inflation and contractual pay raises. To preserve access and services to the public, The Nature Conservancy urges the Senate to consider restoring funding for staffing and for several important divisions and programs included in the Governor's budget. The Nature Conservancy in Ohio works closely with ODNR staff on H2Ohio projects and land management. As a preserve owner in Ohio, TNC is happy to offer public hiking and hunting opportunities on many of our lands. One of the reasons we can offer these opportunities is because ODNR wildlife and natural resource officers help investigate trespassing and poaching complaints. Without ODNR staffing to sufficiently respond to concerns, and ensure safe and lawful public use, it may become necessary to close some hiking and hunting areas to the public in the future.

The Governor's budget would have doubled the number of service forester visits to landowners. In Ohio, 70% of forests are owned by families, and about 85% of woodland owners sell timber without the assistance of a forester. Selling timber without long-term planning assistance from a professional forester is almost always bad for the forest due to unsustainable logging and erosion concerns. The Governor's budget proposal included doubling capacity with service foresters which would allow for much needed progress to conserve and restore the health of our forested acres and the critical habitat they can provide.

The proposed Buckeye Tree Nursery would generate around one million bare root seedlings annually after the third year of implementation, enabling the expansion of Ohio's forests, wildlife habitats, and improved air and water quality. There is a nationwide shortage of seedlings, native trees are needed to maintain healthy forests throughout the state, and a reliable supply of tree seedlings is critical to the success of H2Ohio projects and other essential restoration work.

A decision to restore funding to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources will help to ensure that Ohio's unique lands and waters continue to provide a beautiful and healthy place to live, work, and raise a family.

Respectfully Submitted,

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