

To: Chair Brian Stewart, Vice Chair Michael D. Dovilla, Ranking Member Bride Rose Sweeney, and Members of the House Finance Committee

From: David Hague

Date: 13 March 2025

Re: Proposed budget allotment for the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves General Revenue Fund (HB 96)

Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and Members of the House Finance Committee, on behalf of Division of Natural Areas and Parks, I am writing today to express my support for the proposed budget for the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves as presented in House Bill 96.

Over the past 15 years, I have been working to protect a large conservation area in Central Ohio near Pickerington. I have dedicated nearly all my retired life and a substantial part of my personal wealth to the preservation and restoration of my property to what this natural landscape looked like centuries ago.

In 2021, to ensure that my land remains in a natural state in perpetuity, I worked with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' Division of Natural Areas and Preserves to dedicate 230 of my nearly 1000 acres as Ohio's 140th State Nature Preserve – Coyote Run. As the private owner of a dedicated State Nature Preserve, my impartiality regarding funding for the division could be questioned. And while it is true that I have a vested interest in the success of DNAP, my support goes well beyond self-interest.

I would first say that I am by nature very skeptical of budget increases. However, after my experience with the staff of DNAP, I must admit that my view and skepticism have changed. Long before I dedicated my property as a preserve, DNAP staff visited and brought needed education that involved information on how to restore the land, how to deal with invasive plants but most importantly how to have a vision on protecting our land for the greater good.

As a result of DNAP's guidance, a natural area has been saved in central Ohio that the local mayor calls the "gem of the township." While the portion of the property that was dedicated as a state nature preserve was already of high quality, various staff have continued to work with me to convert agricultural land into exceptional wetlands and restored woodlands.

Because of the resources that were made available to me, Central Ohio citizens will reap the benefits of DNAP's care and dedication for generations. My biggest concern is how the land will be cared for after I am gone. It is a painful truth that high quality natural areas do not take care of themselves – at least not anymore,

not in the age of the onslaught of invasive species. Managing natural areas takes the dedication of many stewards. The survival of rare plants and animals is dependent upon these stewards.

With other past budget increases, DNAP has been able to hire educational staff that can now conduct research and provide public programs on my preserve and other unique sites so that our children can see and understand the unique ecology of Ohio. Protecting nature for the sake of nature is a noble cause and one worthy of funding, but perhaps it is more incumbent upon us to ensure that these sites are used to educate and inform.

I wanted to share my experiences on my property to express my concern that all the resources that DNAP applied to Coyote Run (invasive plant advice, management plans, public interaction, and education outreach) are resources that are at risk. The support DNAP provides to Coyote Run and indeed to all the state nature preserves are part of the legacy DNAP provides to all citizens of Ohio. Without the GRF budget increase as outlined in the Governor's proposed budget and the introduced House Bill 96, staffing for these valuable services may have to be cut.

As I understand, the proposed budget will be sufficient to cover recent unfunded payroll cost increases mandated in state personnel contracts. DNAP needs this increase so that they can maintain existing staff and continue the level of service they have provided me at Coyote Run and the other preserves around the state.

The additional GRF funding for DNAP is nominal when considering the benefits such funding provides to citizens. The folks in this room, including me, are the stewards entrusted to protect the very best of Ohio's natural history. Please give due consideration to preserving Ohio's natural heritage for the citizens of Ohio.

Thank you,

David Hague