



Good morning, esteemed members of the Ohio House Natural Resources Committee. My name is Michael Emans, and I am the Secretary of the Board of the Lake Improvement Association. Our Association represents over 100 businesses and over 1500 members in the Grand Lake Region in Mercer and Auglaize Counties.

I am here today to speak on behalf of Ohio's natural treasures—our State Parks—and the critical need to maintain and increase funding for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources and by extension, our state parks..

Over the past few years, we've all felt the pinch of high inflation rates, and our State Parks have not been immune. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources has faced rising costs across the board—everything from maintenance supplies to fuel for park vehicles. On top of that, the well-deserved 9% pay increases for staff over the last two years, drawn directly from the operating budget, have added further strain.

Don't get me wrong—these raises are vital to keeping skilled, dedicated workers in these roles—but without additional funding to offset them, our parks are using operational costs to cover them and are being forced to do more with less. And that's a problem.

Our State Parks—like Grand Lake, LakeLoroamie , and Indian Lake, just to name a few—are more than just pretty places. They're lifelines for Ohioans.

They're where families camp, hikers explore, and kids learn to love the outdoors. They're also economic engines, drawing millions of visitors each year who spend money in our local communities—on hotels, restaurants, and small businesses.

In 2024 alone, Ohio's State Parks welcomed over 30 million visitors, generating hundreds of millions of dollars for our economy. However, keeping these parks up to the standards the public expects—safe trails, clean facilities, and well-preserved natural areas—takes money.

Right now, the Department of Natural Resources is stretched thin. Inflation has eroded their purchasing power, and the operating budget hasn't kept pace. We're asking park staff to maintain aging infrastructure, protect wildlife habitats, and serve growing crowds with fewer

real dollars than they had a decade ago. That's not sustainable.

If we want our parks to remain the pride of Ohio—and a draw for tourists and residents alike—we need to invest in them.

I urge you to prioritize increased funding for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources in the next budget. Not just to keep up with inflation, but to give our parks the resources they need to thrive. Let's ensure they can continue to serve our people, boost our economy, and meet the high standards Ohioans expect. Thank you for your time and consideration.