

March 5, 2025

House Natural Resources Committee Testimony of Dr. Beck Swab, Holden Forest & Gardens Interested Parties for **HB 96**.

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Good morning, Chair Jones, Vice-chair Blasdel, Ranking Member Rogers and members of the House Natural Resources Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 96. I am Dr. Beck Swab, Director of Conservation and Community at Holden Forest & Gardens. As a native Ohioan and an ecologist, I am deeply committed to ensuring the health of both Ohio's forests and its people. Because of all the benefits forests provide to people- cleaning air and water, providing recreation opportunities, beauty, timber, and jobs, the well-being of forests and people are inextricably linked. And so, to improve the lives of Ohio's people through protecting our forests, forestry jobs, and forest resources, I support the governor's budget request for \$10.2 million to support ODNR, \$10.8 million for the state forest fund, and \$1.1 million for the state nursery to be funded in the budget.

Holden Forests & Gardens consists of two Northeast Ohio environmental and cultural institutions — the Holden Arboretum and Cleveland Botanical Garden. As the 12th largest public garden in the country, Holden Forests & Gardens has an annual attendance of over 350,000. Holden's vision is that all communities are transformed into vibrant places where trees, plants, and people thrive, and we feel this budget request is essential to achieve this goal.

Holden protects over 3,500 acres of forest in northeast Ohio, so we understand the importance of and challenges in maintaining healthy forests. Ohio forests occupy 30% of our terrestrial land area and support a ~\$27 billion per-annum industry which includes thousands of livelihoods. Ohio's forests are important regionally, nationally, and globally, providing crucial resources and processes that support a vast, biodiverse community of life—including human communities. ODNR's efforts are essential in keeping our forests healthy statewide- through their direct forest protection and management in the state's many beautiful parks and preserves, through the state nursery which provides young trees to plant so we can grow new forests, and through their educational resources helping private forest

owners manage their forests. 85% of the state's forests are privately owned. Therefore, landowner education is vital to ensure responsible use of Ohio's forests and protect its resources and related jobs.

With our 67-acre nationally acclaimed Working Woods Learning Forest, developed with the support of ODNR foresters, we have been working with landowners to improve forest education and management in northeast Ohio. Through this program, we have seen first-hand the need for forest education and the value of ODNR's foresters- our programs have connected landowners directly with service foresters, empowered people to actively manage their forests and knowledgeably select management practices and vendors, as well as prevented them from signing contracts with unqualified logging companies that would have resulted in deforestation.

ODNR's urban forestry efforts are essential to maintain our urban tree canopy. Holden works with partners to plant and maintain trees in the city of Cleveland to boost housing values, clean air, improve living conditions, and provide flood protection. ODNR urban foresters support our efforts through education and funding.

As a forest ecologist and Ohio native, I find it important to think on a generational time scale—both for people and for our ecosystems. We are at a crucial point in our state's history: we have the most forests since the 1800s, but wooded land is starting to decline in amount and health as the resource is misunderstood and mismanaged. Our urban tree canopy, on the other hand, is at an all-time low and decreasing every year. It is vital that support for ODNR remain strong at the state level, to protect Ohio's forests, which are inextricably tied to the well-being of all communities in Ohio.

I ask the natural resource committee to invest in the future of our natural resources in Ohio, by funding ODNR, and especially the state forest fund. The division of forestry has a proven track record of its ability to protect our forests and the resources they provide to benefit all Ohioans and ensure our clean air, water, recreation, and economic opportunities in perpetuity.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I'd be happy to answer any questions the committee has.
