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Prepared Statement of Mandy Gerken, Esq.

Chief Administrative Officer, The Gerken Companies

Re: Opposition to Limiting or Eliminating Seasonal Unemployment Benefits

Date: June 17, 2025

Dear Chairperson and Members of the Committee,

I appreciate the opportunity to address you all. My name is Mandy Gerken, and I'm the Chief Administrative Officer of The Gerken Companies, a fourth-generation, family-owned business based in Northwest Ohio. For over 70 years, we've proudly built roads, communities, and careers across this state.

We specialize in paving roads as well as producing aggregate, asphalt, and ready-mix. These are all industries that are deeply tied to Ohio's seasonal climate. Our employees work incredibly hard during the construction season, often in extreme heat and under tight deadlines, to deliver the infrastructure Ohio depends on. But when the season ends, so does the work. That's not a business or personal decision—it's a reality dictated by weather and ODOT specifications.

That's why I'm here today to speak in strong opposition to any proposal that would reduce or eliminate seasonal unemployment benefits. These benefits are not a luxury. They are a bridge. These benefits offer a way for our workers to stay in the industry, support their families, and return to work the following season with the skills and experience we rely on.

At The Gerken Companies, we employ around 655 workers each year, 426 are currently seasonal. Nearly Ninety percent of them return season after season. That kind of loyalty and skill doesn't happen by accident. It is the direct result of investment, training, and mutual respect. Eighty percent of states offer twenty-six weeks, including all of our surrounding states. Without a reliable unemployment compensation system, we risk losing these workers to other industries or other states.

It's important to note that over Seventy percent of states continue to offer the full 26 weeks of unemployment benefits, which remains the national standard. Only 13 states have reduced that duration, and Ohio should not join them in weakening support for workers in industries like ours that are inherently seasonal. Ohio already is experiencing a loss of working population. Ohio has a 12% net loss of college graduates, and 56% of Ohioans are moving out of the state. We should be doing everything we can to retain talent not giving them more reasons to leave.

We understand that the unemployment system needs to be solvent and sustainable. We are not here to avoid responsibility. In fact, we acknowledge that the construction industry should pay its fair share into the system. We're at the table ready and willing to "ante up" but we ask that any increase in employer contributions be phased in gradually, so businesses like ours, who bid work well in advance of construction, can financially prepare.

If solvency is the goal, then let's solve it for the long term. A thoughtful, phased approach to contribution increases is far more effective than short-term deals that will only bring us back to this same conversation in a few years.

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In conclusion, while our industries are fully supportive of a compromise that has us paying more, I want to be clear that reducing the number of benefit weeks cannot be a part of that compromise. The current 26-week structure is **essential** for seasonal workers in Ohio. Any reduction would disproportionately harm industries like ours and the workers who make our work possible.

At The Gerken Companies, we treat our employees like family. We know their names, their stories, and their commitment. We owe it to them and to the future of Ohio's infrastructure to preserve the benefits that keep them in this industry.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,
Mandy Gerken, Esq.
Chief Administrative Officer
The Gerken Companies

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