

May 9, 2025

Chairman Tim Schaffer
Ohio Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee

Ohio Statehouse
1 Capitol Square
Columbus, OH 43215

Dear Chairman Schaffer,

I write today to respectfully request your support for fully funding the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) in the FY 2026–2027 operating budget, specifically the requested \$40 million in appropriation authority for funds generated from oil and gas lease bonus payments.

As you are aware, when the Oil and Gas Land Management Commission was established, a key provision allowed the Division that owns the land under lease to utilize revenues from bonus payments and royalties. For ODNR's Division of Parks and Watercraft, at least 30% of these funds are earmarked for direct investment at the leased property, with the remainder available to support critical statewide operations.

The Division has already begun utilizing the 30% allocation at Salt Fork State Park through prior Controlling Board authorization. However, without the \$40 million in appropriation authority (\$20 million per fiscal year), the remaining funds remain inaccessible—despite being available and designated for vital uses. These are not new tax dollars, but funds that have already been generated and allocated for specific operational needs.

The proposed appropriation would allow ODNR to:

- **Reinforce Law Enforcement:** Like other law enforcement agencies, ODNR struggles with recruitment and retention. Additional funds will help bolster its force to ensure the safety and security of millions of park visitors.
- **Modernize Equipment:** With aging vehicles and costly leased assets, ODNR needs the flexibility to purchase reliable equipment that reduces long-term maintenance and operational costs.
- **Honor Contractual Wage Agreements:** The Division is legally obligated to implement wage increases from recent agreements with employee unions. Without access to these funds, other programs must be cut to comply.
- **Offset Inflationary Pressures:** Rising costs continue to stretch ODNR's budget. Unlocking these funds ensures that ongoing and future operations are not compromised.

Eliminating all \$40 million from ODNR's budget has immediate and far-reaching consequences. Without these funds:

- Public safety will be at risk due to diminished law enforcement presence in state parks.

- Core services such as dredging, waterway management, and facility maintenance will face cuts.
- The Division will be forced to shift already constrained General Revenue Funds to cover mandatory wage hikes, undermining other vital services.

Moreover, the absence of appropriation authority means that funds intended to enhance the public good will remain dormant, providing no return to the taxpayers and failing to realize the full potential of Ohio's natural resource management.

ODNR has wisely sought a flat General Revenue Fund allocation, proposing instead to utilize available lease-generated revenue. This is a prudent and responsible path that reduces the burden on taxpayers while maintaining service quality.

We respectfully request that you restore this crucial \$40 million in funding to the Division's budget. Fully funding ODNR supports not only the preservation and enhancement of our state parks and natural resources but also promotes public safety, sound financial stewardship, and the sustainable development of Ohio's assets.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration and for your ongoing commitment to Ohio's natural resources and the communities they support.

Sincerely,

Karen Raymore, CDME

Executive Director

Hocking Hills Tourism Association