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Good morning. My name is Brewster Rhoads. I live at 1421 Salem Woods Lane in Cincinnati, OH.

I was appointed by Governor DeWine to the Waterways Safety Council to advise ODNR's Division of Parks and Watercraft on boating education, grants, law enforcement and safety. I am an avid kayaker and started the Ohio River Paddlefest 24 years ago (see picture above from 2024). Paddlefest has grown to become the largest paddling event in the U.S.

I am also the Board Chair for the Ohio River Way, an Ohio based nonprofit that works to promote outdoor recreation, tourism and economic development in communities along the Ohio River from Marietta to Louisville. The National Park Service has informed us that our application to be designated as a National Water Trail, one of fewer than 40 in the entire country, is on the desk of the Secretary of the Interior awaiting his official signature. We will become only the second National Water Trail in Ohio. The Great Miami River was designated as a National Water Trail a few years ago.

In my work with Paddlefest, the Ohio River Way and the Waterways Safety Council, I have become quite familiar with the critical role ODNR plays in promoting Ohio as a nationally recognized leader in outdoor recreation. Fishing, camping, hiking, cycling, paddling, boating, birdwatching, mountain biking and hunting connect Ohioans to the beauty, physical health and mental health benefits of the natural environment here in the “Heart of It All”.

As importantly, these activities are critical to the economic health of our state and job opportunities for our residents. Ohio State Park visitors provide \$392 million in direct spending in park facilities managed by ODNR and contributed \$39.3 million in state and local taxes. The economic impact of boating alone generated \$6.4 billion to Ohio’s

economy in 2022. That year, a study found hunters, anglers and wildlife watchers generated nearly \$12.5 billion in annual economic activity, generating approximately \$1 billion in local and state tax revenues.

With a record of overnight stays at our state parks and a record number of boating registrations (630,000 in 2024, up over 50% since 2007), there is clearly a huge and growing constituency for outdoor recreation in Ohio.

The outdoor recreation activity stimulated and supported at least in part by the State of Ohio through the efforts of ODNR play a critical role in boosting our Buckeye economy, attracting visitors and enhancing the quality of life, key to our state’s ability to attract and retain talent and investment.

I am not an expert in budgeting and fiscal management. But I do know that the last thing the State should do to limit the ability of ODNR to manage its facilities, ensure public safety and grow their ability to help Ohio become even more of a national leader in outdoor recreation.

As I understand, ODNR’s budget request for FY2026 is LESS than the FY2025 level of \$725.7 million. The FY2027 request is just 1% higher than the current fiscal year budget – an amazing accomplishment given the impact of inflation.

The Division of Parks and Watercraft’s General Revenue Fund ask is actually FLAT throughout the biennium at \$55 million for FY2026 AND FY2027. To me that reflects prudent fiscal management by the Department.

I know that ODNR also benefits from fees, licenses and other non-GRF revenue sources to carry out its work.

One of the most critical sources of non-GRF financial support for ODNR is revenue from “bonus payments” on oil and gas leases from ODNR managed lands. I understand that

the Department request for FY 2026 and FY2027 asks for a total of \$40 million from this source as approved by the Oil and Gas Land Management Commission.

These funds are critical for the Department's ability to boost law enforcement efforts, replace and maintain aging equipment and attract and retain their skilled workforce. I know firsthand of the challenges that the Department faces in SW Ohio in maintaining patrol boats and law enforcement personnel to ensure safety on the Ohio River and our major recreational lakes in the region.

So I hope that those funds can be retained in the ODNR budget for the upcoming biennium.

Finally, I am deeply concerned that the House version of the bill cuts the H2Ohio program at ODNR and other agencies by approximately 44%. This program has been so successful in addressing water quality issues along the Maumee, the Scioto, the Little Darby, the Great Miami, the Little Miami and at Buckeye Lake just to name a few waterways I know the members of the Committee are familiar with.

For 20 years I have had a one-bedroom cottage in Marblehead and know firsthand about the many H2Ohio projects nearby that are making a big difference in the health of Lake Erie. Why cut back on these successful efforts that help keep the Western Basin of Lake Erie the Walleye Capitol of the world?

Clean water for fishing, paddling, boating, water skiing, etc. is critical for the health of Ohioans and the outdoor recreation industry. Let's continue to make progress in the effort to improve our waterways. Ohio – and our citizens – will be the biggest winners if we do.

Thanks so much for your consideration of my written testimony.