

To Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Koehler, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee. My name is Jennifer Windus and I am the Vice President of the Ohio Natural Areas & Preserves Association (ONAPA).

ONAPA is a statewide non-profit, all volunteer organization formed in 2012, primarily to support and assist the ODNR Division of Natural Areas & Preserves (DNAP), after they faced serious budget cuts in 2011. We have been assisting DNAP and other land-managing partners in Ohio with stewardship efforts on high-quality natural areas since 2016. Many of our natural areas are small and faced with increasing non-native, invasive plant populations that threaten native plant diversity, including many rare plants and animals. Habitat management and invasive plant control is particularly important in high-quality preserves which include prairies, bogs and fens, older growth woodlands, savannas, and barrens. ONAPA and its volunteers conduct more than 80 stewardship projects each year in cooperation with DNAP and other partners. We are fully aware of how much work and resources it takes to maintain Ohio's natural areas, both with habitat management and maintenance of facilities.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify regarding House Bill 96 on behalf of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' Division of Natural Areas and Preserves. Specifically, we (ONAPA) ask that you retain the funding for the Division as it was presented in Governor DeWine's proposed fiscal year 2026-2027 operating budget, and was recently passed by the House of Representatives. Over the past 5 years, DNAP has hired additional preserve management, scenic rivers, and educational outreach staff. Most recently, DNAP has encountered increased payroll and health care expenses. These unfunded mandates will result in nearly \$500,000 of increased expenses in the next biennium. It is critical that DNAP is able to continue its important mission of maintaining state nature preserves and scenic rivers at the level they have been in the past biennium. In addition to filling several vacancies in the Division, this funding will support habitat management that is imperative to conduct to maintain and restore these nature preserves. Once acquired, natural areas must be managed by controlling natural succession and invasive species or we will lose the very features we are trying to protect for future generations.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide this testimony. I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Feel free to contact me at 419.565.8283 or jlwindus@embargo.com.