

Good Morning/Afternoon Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is Chris Duckworth, and I greatly appreciate being able to share some of the experiences and observations I have acquired during a half century of association with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Division of Forestry. And I especially would like to express my support for several programs included in this budget.

My education and profession are as a historian. I worked three decades at the Ohio Historical Society, one at the Columbus Museum of Art, and along the way I also have owned two companies. Still, the older I have become, the more I consider my overriding mission to be the care of our family farm. My great great great grandfather, an American Revolution veteran, his wife, and their first child came to Ohio and settled on this land in 1808. Today, they rest in the family cemetery a few hundred yards from the home that they built.

Our farm is in what today is Perry Township, Fayette County, along the banks of Paint Creek. When my ancestors arrived, the area was covered with forest. A popular anecdote claimed that prior to the arrival of Europeans, the forest was so dense that a squirrel could travel from the Atlantic coast to the Mississippi River without ever touching the ground. While this account is apocryphal, trees certainly were everywhere. To early pioneers, trees were obstacles that prevented them from tilling the rich soil and pasturing livestock. They first needed to clear the land to make their new lives in this amazing land. While this may appear rash today, it was then necessary. And the forests appeared endless. Over time, all of that changed.

In 1916 my grandfather accepted a teaching position at McClain High School and moved to Greenfield, just a few miles from the farm. He and his new bride had met while attending Ohio Northern University, and they subsequently married. Her family had settled the land and continued to farm it. Grandpa quickly linked with them.

Professionally Grandpa was a high-school science teacher, then principal, and finally superintendent of Greenfield schools. He spent more than forty years working to educate young people (and a considerable amount of time futilely attempting to teach me the Latin names of plants, animals, and geological features).

Almost as soon as he arrived, he also became involved with the family farm. He was especially interested in learning the latest scientific agricultural developments and applying that knowledge to the farm. In keeping with this, he also initiated various improvements in the farm's acres of woodland.

As Grandpa strove to accomplish this, he consulted various resources attempting to obtain the latest information. I honestly do not know when Grandpa first began to work with the Division of Forestry, but I do know that when he undertook a timber stand erosion control project in 1935, he sought out experts who could advise him. I also know that, in 1966, Service Forester Byron Kent greatly assisted him with a decade-long woodland improvement project. Later, in 1980, ninety-year-old Grandpa transformed a seventeen-acre island in Paint Creek into a fine stand of oak and walnut — again with the Division of Forestry standing solidly alongside him.

When Grandpa died at age 105 in 1996, he bequeathed his beloved land to his two sons. (Grandma had died previously). When they died, my three cousins and I assumed ownership and responsibility. Like most family farm owners, we consider our land to be much more than a source of income. It is a legacy and a way of life.

My primary purpose in providing this family history is to note that our woodlands — like 85 percent of those in Ohio — are on private land. And I long ago discovered that Ohio's carefully maintained and nurtured woodlands are largely the result of private landowners working with ODNR's Division of Forestry and its wealth of experts for prudent advice. This certainly applies to me and will continue to do so.

The support provided by the Ohio Division of Forestry makes our healthy woodlands possible in a variety of ways. Service Foresters, District Managers, State Forest Managers, Urban Foresters, and others make true the Division motto, "How Can We Help?"

The Division, of course, derives funding from the State of Ohio. From forest management plans to invasive species control, to wildfire management, to the newly re-opened Buckeye State Tree Nursery, the Division's programs center around close personal contact with landowners.

Seminars, workshops, and publications are very helpful. In my experience, however, one-on-one interchanges have been the most helpful. Just to walk our

woods with these knowledgeable foresters is an education — an opportunity that I never miss. Thankfully, they frequently guide landowners through a sometimes-tortuous world of government red tape.

To ensure that this continues – indeed, expands – I most strongly urge that you maintain Governor DeWine’s funding of request \$10,216,231 (FY 2026) and \$10,437,678 (FY 2027), which was fully funded by the House.

I enthusiastically applaud the re-opening of the Buckeye State Tree Nursery. I was honored to attend the dedication ceremony and was most impressed by Governor DeWine's support. I also have toured the expanding facility and am amazed by what has been accomplished in so short a period as well as what is in the offing. The propagation of native Ohio trees is essential to maintaining viable Ohio woodlands. And I am especially excited to see the research being undertaken on the American Chestnut tree.

Hopefully through this and similar projects we will see the return of the great American shade trees — chestnut, ash, and elm. How wonderful that would be.

I also add my support for H2Ohio. Governor DeWine's initiative is truly innovative and impressive. With water quality (and quantity) facing ever-increasing issues, this program addresses them head-on. An important key to the program's success is the formation of the partnerships and collaborations built into H2Ohio. The Ohio Department of Agriculture, Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Ohio EPA, and the Ohio Lake Erie Commission are all involved, and they bring specific expertise to the issues—this is a combination that appears unbeatable. Governor DeWine's budget request was \$46,622,268. The House reduced this, and I urge you to restore the governor's request. So much of our future depends on successfully addressing myriad water issues, and today is none too soon to begin this.

I am continually impressed by the ODNR Division of Forestry's staff, their dedication, vast knowledge, and willingness to share this with private forest owners like me. A call or email question always is promptly and thoughtfully answered.

I also am impressed by their commitment to connect young people with the natural world that surrounds yet sometimes baffles them. This year, our farm is hosting four youth field days for third-grade students from area schools. To witness the students' enthusiasm is incredible. These learning, hands-on experiences are

helping students to gain knowledge of and to build an appreciation and enthusiasm for Ohio's myriad natural resources.

These kids are our futures, and we must ensure that they know about the environment in which they live. Programs such as these ensure that will happen.

I would like to conclude with a statement from Warren Buffett. "Someone's sitting in the shade today" he observed, "is because someone planted a tree a long time ago." These are far wiser words than any I can offer today.

Thank you so much for allowing me to address you today. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Christopher S. Duckworth

Columbus, Ohio

May 23, 2025