

**ODNR OPERATING BUDGET HOUSE BILL 33
WRITTEN TESTIMONY TO FINANCE COMMITTEE
TRACY SIMONS OUTREACH COORDINATER
MORGAN COUNTY**

I am submitting my written testimony on HB 33 and the ODNR Operating Budget. I'm writing to urge the committee to restore funding for the operation, maintenance, and staffing of Jesse Owens State Park.

The total acreage combined of Jesse Owens State Park and Appalachian Hills Wildlife Area make up the state's largest contiguous public land area. People travel to this area from across the country including Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, West Virginia, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Indiana, Texas, New York, Wisconsin, and Vermont. The tourism impact of this area is substantial, not only to the local communities, but to all of Ohio. According to a report by Tourism Economics, in 2021 the total economic impact of tourism in Ohio was \$60.5 billion, which generated 497,000 jobs and \$4.1 billion in taxes. In the Appalachia Region, the total economic impact was \$6.9 billion, which generated 65,353 jobs and total tax revenues of \$925 million. The Appalachia Region is responsible for more than 11% of Ohio's total economic impact of tourism. Morgan County had a total economic impact of \$22.2 million, with 173 jobs and total tax revenues of \$2.6 million.

Morgan County is home to 5 ODNR parks and wildlife areas, therefore relying on the tourism dollars these properties generate. According to the Ohio Association of Community Action Agencies 2022 poverty report, out of Morgan County's population of 14,362 people, 6,238 are 200% below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). That is a county population percentage of 43.4%. Small locally owned businesses including retail, dining, and short-term rentals all rely on tourism dollars for survival.

The improvements ODNR has proposed for Jesse Owens State Park includes 10 cabins, 50 full-service campsites, a retail camp store, a naturalist, increased law enforcement, and a state-of-the-art visitors center. These improvements will benefit Ohio's Appalachia Region by enticing new visitors to the area. To maintain, operate, protect, and educate, ODNR needs the funding levels restored. If funding is cut, the project risks being scaled back or scrapped all together. This would be devastating to the region that has been looking to the future for increased tourism dollars to the area.

Studies have shown that outdoor activities such as hiking, camping, fishing, hunting, and exploring nature improves overall mental health and wellbeing. Our state parks provide outdoor recreational and educational opportunities to not only the visitors that travel here, but also to our underprivileged youth, schools, scouts, youth groups, and various organizations. Jesse Owens State Park has hosted special education classes, summer PE education classes, Soil & Water Field Day for grades K through 6th, underprivileged youth from juvenile facilities, seniors from local nursing facilities, and various events such as Hooked on Fishing, Not on Drugs which has hundreds of children in attendance.

Spring of 2019 the special education class from Philo High School came out to Hook Lake, which is now part of Jesse Owens State Park, to have a day of food, fun, and fishing. At the time I was the Recreational Program Specialist for American Electric Power's public lands, which included ReCreation Land, that is now Jesse Owens State Park. The children in attendance had varying degrees of learning and social interaction difficulty. One young man stood out for he distanced himself from his peers, was quiet, reserved, and introverted. In speaking with his teacher, I learned that he had autism and interacting in social situations was difficult for him. Over the course of the next few hours, I watched this child become

more interactive with his peers, participating in the fishing competition, having lunch with the group, and receiving cheers from his classmates as he won a trophy for his catch of the day "Big Bass". That day he was part of a whole, not just one of many.

It's not only about statistics, but the people behind the statistics. The small business owners who struggled to make their dream of owning and growing a business into something for their family and their community, the children from our schools that are provided outdoor educational opportunities through the 198 Wild School Sites, an extension of Project Wild, throughout Ohio, and the men and women who have dedicated their lives to work in a career for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. You can't put a price on the joy of a child catching their first bluegill, a class of kindergarteners experiencing "the great outdoors", or a bus load of seniors from a nursing facility that may only have 1- or 2-day outings per year, but they should not be dismissed when making budget decisions for the upcoming fiscal years. This decision effects Ohio's Appalachia Region, communities, small business owners, educational opportunities for our youth, and the future projects of our Division of Parks and Watercraft, as well as all the divisions under ODNR.

I urge you to restore funding to our Division of Natural Resources. In doing so, you are supporting Ohio's education system, Ohio's small businesses, and the protection of Ohio's natural resources. Let's truly make Ohio, The Heart of it All.

Thank you for supporting Ohio Appalachia, its communities, economy, and natural wonders that make it a tourism destination.

Tracy Simons