

**TESTIMONY BY RICHARD SHANK, PHD
STATE DIRECTOR, OHIO CHAPTER
THE NATURE CONSERVANCY
IN SUPPORT OF THE BUDGET FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
APRIL 5, 2007
HOUSE FINANCE & APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE
ON AGRICULTURE & DEVELOPMENT**

Chairman Core and members of the Subcommittee: My name is Rich Shank, State Director for the Ohio Chapter of The Nature Conservancy. Thank you for this opportunity to testify today in support of the FY 08-09 Executive Budget for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

The Nature Conservancy is a leading conservation organization working around the world to protect ecologically important lands and waters for nature and people. Over the past 50 years, and with the support of our more than 30,000 Ohio members, we have protected more than 35,000 acres of forest, wetland and grassland in Ohio.

The Conservancy often works in partnership with the Department of Natural Resources to carry out science-based conservation work for the people of Ohio. For example, we have agreements with the Division of Wildlife to allow public hunting and fishing on a number of our preserves – adding dollars to the local economies while at the same time maintaining ecological balance on the property. We have worked with Wildlife and the Division of Forestry to develop cooperative management strategies for large forests in Ohio, and with the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves to support the state's Natural Heritage Database. And last week we co-sponsored a symposium with the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves that brought together more than 400 amateur and professional botanists to advance the understanding of Ohio's natural heritage. These projects meet our common goals – to protect the natural resources of Ohio for the people who live and work here.

As our relationship with the Department grows, so has our understanding of the difficulties ODNR faces in maintaining adequate levels of staff and services to meet the needs of Ohio families. The facilities at our state parks – which once received national acclaim for their quality – are suffering from a \$300 million maintenance backlog. Other public amenities, from boating access to hunting areas and hiking trails, suffer equally from the tight departmental budgets, even as more Ohio families look for affordable recreation close to home.

We are, then, glad to see that in the Executive Budget for FY 08-09, the Department's overall General Fund budget is flat -- instead of another round of cuts. And the \$2.7 million Central Support line item provides adequate funding for departmental central support functions such as finance and human resources.

We're also happy to see continued support for Ohio's Natural Heritage Database, which for more than 30 years has tracked the location and vitality of the state's rare plants and ecological communities, including wetlands. This database provides developers, consultants and Ohio agencies – including the Ohio Department of Transportation – with easy, affordable access to the information needed to complete land development permits, rural development grants, and highway improvements. Completing these permits is crucial to keeping economic development projects on schedule. Without this one-stop access, consultants would spend thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours conducting record reviews and field research. It is in everyone's best interest to keep this database functioning and up to date.

The budget now being proposed could really turn around the trend of cuts to this department and would send an important message to the people of Ohio.

We ask your support for the Executive Budget for ODNR. Thank you.