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Will 2009 be last summer for Ohio's Scenic Rivers?

Ohio Senate threatens to dry up funding, flush 40 years of effort building nation's first wild, scenic and recreational rivers program

(Galloway, OH)— State and local conservation leaders gathered at one of the nation's most pristine streams today—the Big and Little Darby Creeks—to mark a high watermark but also a potential death blow to Ohio's efforts to protect and promote its most scenic and wild rivers:

- Forty-one years ago, Ohio pioneered the river preservation movement with the passage of the nation's first scenic rivers law in 1968. The program helps protect water quality, enhance public access, and promote recreation and travel and tourism opportunities along Ohio's remaining high-quality streams and rivers. Since its passage, Ohio has designated 800 river miles on 14 separate river systems as State Scenic Rivers and protected 4,000 acres of forested river corridors and public access sites.
- Three days ago, the Ohio Senate voted to dry up funding for the program. State Senators bowed to pressure from motor boaters whose lobby objected to Governor Strickland's proposal to transfer the program to the Ohio Division of Watercraft. A joint committee of the Ohio House and Ohio Senate will begin work next week to try to reach a compromise on this and other issues in the new two-year state operating budget.

"After 40 years of nurturing them, the Ohio Senate has turned its back and sold Ohio's Scenic Rivers down the river," said Jack Shaner, Deputy Director of the Ohio Environmental Council.

"State Scenic Rivers like the Big and Little Darby Creeks deliver priceless benefits to the public, from fishing and paddling to wildlife habitat and 'one-tank trip' destinations. But those benefits may be threatened if lawmakers let the Scenic Rivers program circle the drain. How could our state's leaders turn their back on these magnificent waterways?"

The Ohio House of Representatives voted earlier this spring to approve the Governor's plan, which calls for canoe and kayak owners and liveries to pick up most of the program's \$550,000 annual cost through increased registration fees. The Ohio Senate plan would cripple the program, affording it less than \$100,000 a year from the sale of scenic license plates.

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The primary users of State Scenic Rivers are canoeists and kayakers. These “paddlers” represent the fastest growing group of boaters in Ohio. The number of registered canoes and kayaks in Ohio increased from 60,065 in 2003 to 80,640 in 2008—a 34% increase. Almost one of every five of the 416,942 registered boats in Ohio is a canoe or kayak.

The Ohio Senate rejected the Governor’s plan to transfer most of the program’s \$550,000 annual cost from general taxpayers to paddlers. Under the Governor’s plan, individual paddlers and livery owners would pay a new \$5 and \$1.50 registration fee, respectively.

The \$550,000 annual program cost would amount to less than 3% of total annual expenditures by the Ohio Division of Watercraft—on a program that would directly benefit almost 20% of all registered watercraft in the state.

By rejecting the plan, the Ohio Senate chose instead to fund the program only with revenue from the sale of Scenic River license plates. The Ohio DNR projects \$70,000 to \$100,000 in license plate proceeds this year, hardly enough to fund the Scenic Rivers Program’s seven full-time river managers and five part-time stream quality monitors.

Ohio DNR officials warn that losing the Scenic Rivers program could mean the loss of:

- river access;
- public areas along these rivers;
- protection of the state’s most pristine river systems that feed many of the state’s most popular boating lakes and reservoirs; and
- an opportunity to support paddlesports, the fastest-growing boating activity.

“We’re asking citizens to let their state lawmakers know that they care about scenic rivers like the Darby Creeks,” said Shaner. If lawmakers don’t shore up funding, this successful program will go belly up, leaving many a paddler up the creek without their beloved Scenic River.”

Joining the OEC today were representatives of The Nature Conservancy Ohio Chapter, the Darby Creek Association, and local watershed protection groups.

For more information, go to www.theOEC.org.

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Additional information:

Save Our Scenic Rivers action alert: <http://www.theoec.org/TakeAction.htm>

Ohio DNR Scenic Rivers program: <http://ohiodnr.com/tabid/985/Default.aspx>

Governor Strickland’s budget proposal for Ohio Scenic Rivers Program:

<http://ohiodnr.com/watercraft/Current%20Events/tabid/3164/Default.aspx>

The mission of the Ohio Environmental Council (OEC) is to secure healthy air, land, and water for all who call Ohio home. The OEC is Ohio’s leading advocate for fresh air, clean water, and sustainable land use. The OEC has a 40-year history of innovation, pragmatism, and success. Using legislative initiatives, legal action, scientific principles, and statewide partnerships, the OEC secures a healthier environment for Ohio’s families and communities. For more information, visit www.theOEC.org.