



Statement of Jack Shaner, OEC Deputy Director – June 22, 2009

Good morning. My name is Jack Shaner, and I am Deputy Director for the Ohio Environmental Council. The OEC is a network of more than 100 environmental conservation groups working to secure healthy air, land, and water for all who call Ohio home.

Joining me today are Josh Knights, Executive Director of the Nature Conservancy in Ohio; Jennifer Miller, Conservation Program Coordinator for the Sierra Club, Ohio Chapter; Elaine Marsh, Co-Founder and Conservation Chair for Friends of The Crooked River; and Joe Sommer, Director of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources for former Governor Richard Celeste.

Forty years ago today, a spark from a passing freight train caught some oily debris floating on the surface of the Cuyahoga River on fire. The blaze raged for hours as firefighters struggled to bring it under control. It wasn't the first time the "Burning River" caught fire. But thanks to a flurry of environmental protection legislation, regulation, enforcement, and investment this incident helped stoke, it was the last.

Forty years later, the resulting clean up has been remarkable, especially in Ohio, one of the most populous and industrialized states in America.

Fish have returned to the Cuyahoga. People once again flock to our rivers and streams to fish and swim. The young and old are breathing easier, because the air is no longer choked with lead and carbon monoxide and the odor of sulfur. Our Great Lake Erie has made great comeback. Once called "a dying lake," Erie is now known as the "Walleye Capitol of the World." Ohio has protected thousands of acres of natural areas and hundreds of miles of scenic rivers. We even have a national park.

None of this progress happened by accident. It has taken steady investment, vigilant oversight, and continued enforcement and collaboration to protect our air, land, and water resources. And Ohio is a healthier place to live and work and play because of it.

But today, we are in peril of slipping backward. Ohio's dire state budget outlook could put that steady progress for environmental clean up and natural resource conservation at risk.

The choices our state lawmakers make in the next nine days could have a significant impact on how safe the water is to drink, how clean the air is to breathe, how clean the waters are to fish and swim, whether or not Ohio can care for its system of official State Scenic Rivers, let alone ever designating a new Scenic River, and how well Ohio fulfills its public trust responsibility to care for our state parks, nature preserves, and forests.

We once again are calling on state lawmakers to approve a \$1 increase in the state “tipping” fee on each ton of municipal solid waste disposed of in a landfill and to raise registration fees on canoes and kayaks by \$1.67 a year for paddlers and \$1.50 a year for livery owners.

This averages out to half a cent for every 10 pounds of garbage deposited in a landfill to help keep our drinking water safe to drink, our air clean to breathe, and our rivers and lakes clean enough to fish and swim and less than the cost of half a gallon of gasoline to care for our existing and to designate new State Wild and Scenic Rivers.

These fees will also shift millions of dollars of pressure each year off of the general revenue fund, freeing up precious GRF dollars for schools, health care, and other vital services.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of these fee increases. Consider the following projection from an Ohio EPA budget analysis, projecting the impact of the Ohio Senate’s rejection of the municipal waste fee proposal:

“Ohio EPA will not be able to ensure compliance with drinking water regulations and more drinking water systems will face enforcement, many of which will have to be referred to U.S. EPA for enforcement. Ohioans will not have the same assurances of receiving safe drinking water.”

The OEPA documents project deep funding cuts that will take a serious toll on the agency’s ability to safeguard safe drinking water, protect rivers and lakes, and control air pollution. For the State Scenic Rivers program, the choice is equally stark. Without the canoe and kayak fee increase, there will be no more Scenic Rivers program. Period.

The choice is up to lawmakers. This is a golden opportunity to cast a green vote to keep 40 years of clean up moving forward, or to cast a brown vote and slip backward. No one wants to return to the days of the “Burning River.” But now is the time, and this is the vote, for lawmakers to stand up and be counted.