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## Final Fate of Ohio's Scenic Rivers Program is Days Away

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

(Loudonville, OH)—State conservation leaders gathered near the banks of one of Ohio's most pristine streams today—the Mohican State Scenic River—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—including the Mohican River—as State Scenic Rivers and protected 4,000 acres of forested river corridors and public access sites.
- Earlier this month, 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 have until midnight next Tuesday to try to reach a compromise on this and other issues in the proposed new two-year state operating budget.

“After 40 years of nurturing them, the Ohio General Assembly may be on the verge of turning its back and selling Ohio's Scenic Rivers down the river,” said Coby Williams, Legislative and Public Affairs Associate of the Ohio Environmental Council.

“State Scenic Rivers like the Mohican River deliver priceless benefits to the public, from fishing and paddling to wildlife habitat and ‘one-tank trip’ destinations. But these benefits may be threatened if lawmakers let the Scenic Rivers program circle the drain. How could our state's leaders threaten to turn their back on these magnificent waterways?”

The Ohio House of Representatives voted earlier this year to approve a proposal by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, which calls for canoe and kayak owners and livery owners to pick up the program's \$550,000 annual cost through increased registration fees on non-motorized boats. The Ohio Senate rejected the plan, leaving the program with only an estimated \$78,000 per year in revenue from the sale of Scenic River license plates.

The ODNR proposal calls for transferring the program from the general revenue fund (GRF)—comprised of state sales and income tax—to boat registration fees paid by paddlers. Under the plan, canoe and kayak owners would pay an additional \$5 every three years (\$1.67/year) in registration fees; livery owners would pay \$1.50 more per boat, per year. ODNR estimates the fee increase would generate \$165,000 in state fiscal year 2010 (July 1, 2010 – June 30, 2011.)

The projected fee income together with other revenue sources, including a projected \$365,000 in existing registration fees on non-motorized boats, are expected to total \$787,000 for FY 2010—more than enough to cover the \$550,000 annual funding request budget. (See Slide 26 of the power point presentation posted at <http://ohiodnr.com/watercraft/Current%20Events/tabid/3164/Default.aspx>.)

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.

Approval of the funding proposal is all the more urgent in the wake of Gov. Ted Strickland's modified budget proposal, announced last Friday. The Governor called for deep cuts to GRF-dependent agencies, including the ODNR, to balance the new two-year state operating budget.

In his original budget unveiled in February, the Governor requested \$236 million in GRF for ODNR in the new two-year budget. Friday, he called for \$34 million less in GRF, a 15% cut.

The Scenic Rivers program currently is in ODNR's Division of Natural Areas and Preserves. The Governor's new budget proposal calls for reducing GRF funding for DNAP by 26% in the first year and by 100% in the second year of the new biennium.

"Simply put, without the registration fees, the State Scenic Rivers program will literally be homeless and all but penniless," said Williams.

The primary users of State Scenic Rivers are canoeists and kayakers. 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.

By rejecting the fees proposal, the Ohio Senate has left the Scenic Rivers program with insufficient revenue to fund the program's seven full-time river managers and five part-time stream quality monitors.

Ohio DNR officials have warned 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 paddle-sports, the fastest-growing boating activity.

"Clean water, not gold or oil, is America's most precious asset. Without clean water we lose our biological diversity and ultimately, our health. The Scenic Rivers programs promote and protect one of Ohio's most precious resources, the one we simply cannot do without," said Cheryl Harner, President of the Greater Mohican Audubon Society.

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

For more information, go to [www.theOEC.org](http://www.theOEC.org).

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Additional information:

June 6, 2009 NBC-4-TV (Columbus, OH) video: <http://bit.ly/H108S>

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

Ohio DNR budget proposal for Ohio Scenic Rivers Program:

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

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

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](http://www.theOEC.org).