Hi,

My name is Ryan Pepper and I am the State of Ohio Director for the American Canoe Association. The mission of the Ohio Chapter is to preserve paddling environments and to help others safely enjoy local waterways. The proposed Parks and Watercraft merger reinforces that mission by emphasizing waterway safety.

By cross training parks and watercraft officers it will enhance the safety of all people on Ohio's waterways. I was personally involved in a situation where this could of made a difference. While kayaking at Nimisila Reservoir with my son we noticed an overturned sailboat, one person was in the water and one was sitting on the hull. Air temperature was about 70 degrees and the water temperature was only 60. Perfect for getting hypothermia. We initially helped the grandfather and grandson right the boat and empty the water. They were able to get back underway but quickly flipped the boat a second time. We were able to single shore to call for assistance. We expected help quickly as we knew park officers were less than 5 minutes away. After 10 minutes we singled a power boat to come get the victims out of the water as both men were now shivering. By the time Division of Watercraft officers finally made it out to the boaters it had been more than an hour since they were called.

The slow response time was not due to any fault of the officers. The Watercraft Officers were stationed at another facility that was approximately 20 to 25 minutes away. The parks officers had neither the training nor equipment to respond. This incident fortunately had a happy ending as both men were safely returned to shore and a little wiser for the experience.

This merger of departments will benefit all Ohioans. It will reduce administrative cost by combining facilities. It will improve safety both on land and on the water as there will be more officers working together instead of as individual units. There will be additional money to improve our parks by doing things like building additional restroom facilities, improving boat ramps, and development of hiking and water trails.

I was concerned about boating fees that I pay going towards a joint fund, but after reading the literature on the bill, I was pleasantly surprised to see that the funding for Parks and Watercraft will continue to remain separate.

I have read the proposal and I think that the merger increases efficiency in the Department of Natural Resources. More importantly, I believe it will enhance the experience we have while visiting our parks and waterways by improving safety and the facilities across the state. Allowing the Officer Corp to have more flexibility in responding to incidents is key and I strongly support this bill.

Thank You.