



NEWS RELEASE

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Ohio Outdoor Recreation Economy Conference to Honor Leaders Driving Growth and Innovation Across Sectors

ATHENS, Ohio – July 17, 2025 – Tomorrow, Ohio will host its first statewide conference dedicated to growing the outdoor recreation economy and celebrating leaders who are driving innovation and investment across the state.

The landmark Ohio Outdoor Recreation Economy Conference (OOREC), organized by the Outdoor Recreation Council of Appalachia (ORCA), made possible by an Appalachian Regional Commission grant, will take place July 22–24 at Ohio University in Athens and bring together more than 150 leaders from business, government, philanthropy, and conservation.

The awards celebrate individuals and organizations whose catalytic investments and collaborations have strengthened Ohio's growing outdoor recreation sector, a key driver of economic development, health, and community vitality.

Confirmed honorees include:

- **State Agency Impact Award:** Brady Johnson, Deputy Director at Ohio Parks and Watercraft, on behalf of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR)
- **Public Lands Partnership Award:** Lee Stewart, Wayne National Forest Supervisor
- **Private Citizen Championship Award:** Miki Brooks, on behalf of the Jay and Miki Brooks Family
- **Health Industry Innovation Award:** LeeAnn Lucas-Helber, President, OhioHealth O'Bleness Hospital
- **Distinguished Academic-Community Leadership Award:** Julia Paxton, Ph.D. Professor of Economics Ohio University

Additional invited awardees include the Ohio Department of Natural Resources and legislative champions who have advanced outdoor recreation initiatives across the state.

"This recognition is about more than individual contributions," said Jessie Powers, Executive Director of ORCA. "It is about honoring the collective momentum transforming Ohio into a model for how outdoor recreation fuels resilient economies, healthier communities, and cross-sector partnerships improving quality of life for Ohioans."

OhioHealth, a leading healthcare system, will be recognized for its \$100,000 investment in the Baileys Trail System, a multi-year commitment supporting trail infrastructure that promotes public health and regional tourism.

The awards ceremony will be held Wednesday, July 23, at 4 p.m. in the Baker University Center at Ohio University prior to the conference networking reception.

OOREC marks Ohio's first statewide gathering dedicated to accelerating outdoor recreation's economic and social impact. This cross-sector approach reflects ORCA's broader commitment to collaboration, demonstrated through digital innovation efforts, regional branding and planning, and its Corporate Social Responsibility Community Forum, which unites leaders across Ohio to strengthen community investment and advance place-based economic development.

For more information about OOREC, registration details, and the full conference agenda, visit www.orcaohio.com/oorec.

About ORCA

The Outdoor Recreation Council of Appalachia (ORCA) is a council of governments advancing outdoor recreation, regional collaboration, and community development across Southeast Ohio to amplify related economic, health, social, and environmental benefits. ORCA manages the

Baileys Trail System in partnership with The Wayne National Forest and leads cross-sector initiatives alongside Partner and Member communities, spanning 18-Appalachian Ohio counties.