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ORCA Awarded $150,000 to Expand Economic Opportunities Across Ohio's Rolling Hills

Just Transition Fund investment will support local businesses and strengthen tourism infrastructure across 18 Appalachian Ohio counties.

ATHENS, OHIO — November 18, 2026— The Outdoor Recreation Council of Appalachia (ORCA) has been awarded $150,000 from the Just Transition Fund's Local Economy Lab to advance economic development opportunities across Ohio's Rolling Hills, an 18-county regional initiative leveraging the area's outdoor recreation, cultural, and heritage assets to strengthen local economies and enhance quality of life in Appalachian Ohio.

The funding will support the next phase of Ohio's Rolling Hills brand and regional development strategy by connecting small businesses and local makers to the region's growing outdoor recreation and tourism economy. Building on investments in trails, visitor centers, and other key attractions, the project will establish a framework for regional business collaboration, expand opportunities to sell locally made products, and improve the region's digital presence.

The project includes three primary components:

- **Regional Business Collaborative:** ORCA will partner with the PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship's Placemaker CoLab to develop a business collaborative plan for Ohio's Rolling Hills. The plan will establish a framework for membership, shared marketing opportunities, product standards, and long-term management, helping independent businesses reach new customers and markets.
- **Local Product Integration:** The project will support the purchase and placement of locally made products at six retail locations near key regional destinations, including the Baileys Trail System Visitor Center and Wayne National Forest Athens Unit Headquarters.
- **Digital Infrastructure:** Improvements to the Ohio's Rolling Hills website will expand visitor resources, showcase regional stories and experiences, and establish a searchable directory of businesses and makers. The upgrades will also position the region for future integration with a broader digital platform designed to support tourism, business visibility, and online sales.

"Significant investments in outdoor recreation infrastructure have been made across Appalachian Ohio in recent years, and now we're focused on making sure those investments create meaningful opportunities for the residents and communities around them," said Jessie Powers, ORCA Executive Director.

The initiative builds on the May 2026 launch of the Ohio's Rolling Hills brand, initially supported through an Appalachian Regional Commission POWER grant. The brand highlights the region's outdoor recreation, cultural heritage, small towns, and locally rooted experiences.

"Ohio's Rolling Hills was built around the idea that our region has a compelling story to tell, and that collaboration can help us share it more effectively," said Delia Palmisano, ORCA Deputy Director. "This next phase is about turning that shared identity into real opportunities for the small businesses, makers, and communities that make our region unique."

Ohio's Rolling Hills brand development was a multi-year effort led by tourism professionals in 18-counties serving on ORCA's Advisory Committee, alongside ORCA staff. The project also draws on the experience of the PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship, which has developed a successful model for connecting rural businesses with the visitor economy in rural north central Pennsylvania Wilds region, spanning 13-counties.

Over the next 12 months, ORCA anticipates completing the business collaborative plan, introducing locally made products at six destination-based retail locations, and implementing digital upgrades to better connect visitors with the region's businesses and experiences. Completing this plan will involve direct engagement with regional businesses and stakeholders. Please stay tuned for how you can get involved.

About the Outdoor Recreation Council of Appalachia

The Outdoor Recreation Council of Appalachia (ORCA) is a council of governments established in 2019 to leverage Appalachian Ohio's outdoor recreation assets for sustainable economic development and improved quality of life. ORCA works with local governments, community partners, and regional stakeholders to develop recreation infrastructure, strengthen regional collaboration, and create economic opportunities throughout Appalachian Ohio. **LEARN MORE:** www.orcaohio.com

About Ohio's Rolling Hills

Ohio's Rolling Hills is a regional tourism and economic development initiative spanning 18 counties across southern and southeastern Ohio. Developed through a collaborative effort led

by ORCA, the initiative connects the region's outdoor recreation, cultural heritage, small towns, and local businesses through a shared destination identity. Designed to work at a regional scale, Ohio's Rolling Hills aims to strengthen local economies, elevate regional destinations, and create lasting benefits for rural communities. **LEARN MORE:** www.ohiosrollinghills.com

