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Chairman Vitale, Vice Chair Kick, Ranking Member Denson, and members of the House Energy and Natural Resources Committee, my name is Roger High, Executive Director of the Ohio Sheep Improvement Association and I appreciate the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on HB 553 on behalf of the Ohio Sheep Improvement Association (“OSIA”) and its members.

OSIA greatly appreciates and supports the provisions within HB 553 that provide needed clarification and protections relative to taking and possessing coyotes in Ohio, which is very important to Ohio’s sheep and lamb producers. The provisions within HB 553 that are of particular importance to OSIA and its members include the provision that: "A person may take and possess a coyote year-round, and the chief of the division of wildlife shall not adopt any rule to the contrary." In addition, we strongly support the provision amending 1533.111 to read, "(J) A fur taker permit is not required to hunt or trap coyotes."

Under longstanding rule, a fur taker permit is not required for anyone trapping or hunting coyotes, whether on their own land or the land of another. This bill will harmonize the law with this important exemption provided in rule. As coyotes pose a unique danger to farmers and livestock owners, OSIA supports legislation that will codify the exemption from obtaining a fur taker permit for anyone hunting or trapping coyotes. This codification will remove the potential for increased costs, additional hurdles and decreased opportunities for landowners seeking assistance from their neighbors and others in managing coyotes on the landowner’s property should the existing rule be amended.

This bill further provides a crucial safeguard and welcome reassurance to farmers and livestock owners that an open season on coyotes, whether through hunting or trapping, shall remain law in Ohio. Coyotes cause significant damage to Ohio’s sheep and lamb industry. Coyotes are a primary reason for sheep and lamb farmers to suffer financial losses as well as a reason for going out of the sheep and lamb business. Hunting and trapping coyotes is an essential management tool to limit predation of livestock. Losses to sheep and lamb farmers can occur anytime of year, but are greatest during lambing season which traditionally occur outside of existing trapping dates for other furbearing species. Maintaining an open season for taking and possessing coyotes through any lawful means provides farmers, livestock owners, and landowners the options and flexibility they need to protect their livestock and their property without undue burden.

Opponents to this bill may point to the existence of current nuisance wild animal control provisions as a reason to allow for closing the coyote season in the future. However, the existence of these nuisance provisions does not alleviate the many burdens that would be caused should the coyote season be closed. In relying upon the nuisance provisions in a closed season, problems can arise if there is a disagreement as to whether the coyote taken was considered a “nuisance.” Further, relying upon the nuisance provisions would greatly decrease opportunities for landowners to seek assistance from others in managing problem coyotes on the landowner’s property, as anyone accepting a fee or compensation of any kind would need to be a licensed commercial nuisance wild animal control operator.

In summary, HB 553 codifies important protections for Ohio farmers, livestock owners, and landowners to address predation and destruction from coyotes at any time of year without undue burden. Thank you again Mr. Chairman and members of the committee for this opportunity to provide written testimony today in support of HB 553. If you have questions, please contact the Ohio Sheep Improvement Association Executive Director Roger High at 614-499-2931 or via email at rhigh@ofbf.org