



# Ohio Department of Natural Resources

MIKE DeWINE, GOVERNOR

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**House Finance and Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources**  
**Testimony in Support of House Bill 166**  
**Provided by Ohio Department of Natural Resources Director Mary Mertz**  
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Good morning Chairman Hoops, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and Members of the House Finance and Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources. My name is Mary Mertz and I am the Director of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR). Thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony today on our department's budget request.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) is a diverse and expansive state agency. Consisting of eleven divisions that employ more than 2600 men and women, ODNR employees and properties can be found in all 88 counties of the state. Their efforts help to provide Ohioans with safe access to the state's unparalleled recreational and abundant mineral resources that stretch from the beautiful shores and islands of Lake Erie, through the rolling hills of the Hocking Valley, and eventually culminating in the waters of the great Ohio River. Ohio is a magical place full of sites and wonders and it will take continued care and investment to ensure that these experiences remain available to the people that call the Buckeye State home.

Nationally, interest and participation in outdoor activities, especially camping, hiking and kayaking, is on the rise. Last year we broke a record with more than 850,000 lodge, cabin and camping reservations, and thousands more visitors hiking, biking, swimming, boating and recreating daily at ODNR properties. Maintaining and protecting Ohio's natural assets and the investments that have been made in parks, natural areas, and wildlife areas for the benefit of our citizens is a priority, and so today we are asking for funding to do just that.

Most of ODNR's operations are supported by the revenue earned by programs and not the General Revenue Fund. For example, fishing and hunting fees support the Division of Wildlife. In fact, just 29% of the department's budget is supported by the General Revenue Fund. We are requesting a modest increase in GRF funding to better carry out our mission of ensuring a balance between wise use and protection of our natural resources for the benefit of all.

The ODNR budget request is \$495.9 million for FY20 and \$414.4 million for FY21. The GRF portion of that amount is only \$127.7 million in FY20, and \$134.6 million in FY21. Most of the funding is to continue current operations. Today, I want to highlight for you the areas where we are requesting GRF increases.

## **Division of Natural Areas & Preserves**

Perhaps the most important request for additional funding is to restore the capacity of the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves to protect Ohio's most precious, unique, and rare natural resources. The

Division protects more than 30,000 acres of land with ecological or geologic significance. These natural areas serve as sanctuaries for rare plants and animals, and they feature remnants of Ohio's natural heritage. Likewise, our Scenic River program protects 15 rivers that have ecological beauty and an important environmental function.

ODNR staff, along with countless volunteers, protect environmental quality and preserve and enhance biological diversity at our natural areas through invasive species management, stream monitoring and research. With additional funding the Division will provide a science-based approach to administer the system of 136 state nature preserves and 15 Ohio scenic rivers. With new funding the Division will increase public outreach and activities to three times the current level, as well as dramatically increase their work in controlling invasive species. This funding will also be used to maintain important infrastructure, such as boardwalks and bridges that are necessary to allow Ohioans to visit and experience these special areas, without damaging the fragile ecosystems. This Division does important work that will impact Ohio's future for decades, and we want to give them the tools to carry out their mission.

### **Division of Parks and Watercraft**

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources is proud that Ohio is one of only seven states in the nation to provide free admission to our state parks. Our state parks system is an important component of Ohio's tourism industry and serves as a key economic driver for local communities. In 2017, Ohio State Parks generated business sales totaling \$455.8 million of direct and indirect spending resulting in \$57.9 million in taxes, and \$115.7 million in wages. ODNR is committed to providing safe, high-quality recreational experiences for all visitors, which requires continued investment. We are requesting \$14 million dollars over the biennium to provide much needed maintenance and personnel to support our state parks. We are also requesting \$25 million for infrastructure improvements in our parks, including items such as fire safety systems, HVAC and electrical systems, and necessary roof repairs to keep our visitors safe and dry.

First, we need additional staffing to carry out the maintenance necessary to protect the investments already made in our parks and marinas. Maintaining restrooms, campgrounds, pools, and other facilities takes people and equipment. We all expect our parks and marinas to be well-maintained, and we need adequate personnel to carry out those tasks. We are also subject to the increasing costs of utilities as our facility inventory expands, and so we need the basic funding to cover those costs.

Second, at all parks, regardless of the time of year, customers expect to see open amenities and visible staff. Seasonal staff are currently concentrated in a narrow window of the busy summer months, which means customers arriving at many state parks on a sunny day in April are met with winterized (closed) restrooms, closed stores, no programming, etc. We are seeking funding to increase seasonal hours so that nature centers, pools, campground offices and camp stores can operate longer hours, for a longer season, to meet customer expectations. We also look to add hours for park naturalists and increase educational programs such as guided hikes, nature studies, and youth programming.

I am also requesting funding for additional Natural Resources Officers. These individuals are not only the division's commissioned first responders; they are often the face of the department. Officers are responsible for safety and security of park visitors on land and water, as well as protecting public property. While state parks and waterways are generally safe settings, visitors feel safer knowing there is an officer in the vicinity to call if there are issues, especially those unaccustomed to the remote locations and natural, rustic settings of a state park. Additional officers would extend hours of enforcement coverage to heavy use periods (into the evening hours) when overnight visitors may experience conflict.

Additionally, our own surveys reflect that outdoor users have a strong interest in advancing the trail network in our state parks with the focus on completing long-distance trails. We are seeking additional funding for maintenance work on existing trails and to build and maintain new trails, as well as provide technological support of these trails including GIS and mapping.

We have an amazing park system in Ohio. Our areas are first class and we want to keep them that way. For those areas that need additional attention and restoration, we are ready to get to work.

## **Division of Wildlife**

Ohio has world class opportunities for fishing, hunting, trapping, and other forms of outdoor recreation on 146 wildlife areas encompassing 220,000 acres of public land, 124,000 acres of inland water, 7,000 miles of streams, 2.25 million acres of Lake Erie and 481 miles of Ohio's portion of the Ohio River, all managed by the Division of Wildlife.

Programs and projects under the Division of Wildlife are primarily supported by license fees and permits for hunting, fishing, and trapping in Ohio. Because many of these fees have not increased since 2004, operating within available revenue has required the Division to reduce staff, and defer maintenance. In the history of the Division of Wildlife, this is the longest we have ever gone without an increase in resident fees. As a result, we have closed and consolidated work units and facilities, delayed infrastructure improvements, reduced services such as invasive species control, delayed improvements to fish hatcheries, and delayed equipment purchases. We are currently operating with insufficient numbers of wildlife officers to protect the valuable Lake Erie fishery, and some Ohio counties operate without any wildlife officers at all. The hunters, anglers, and trappers who pay these fees expect a return in the programs and services we provide. These programs require staff and materials to carry out important work such as fish and wildlife research, monitoring wildlife diseases, production of educational materials, building boat ramps and fishing piers, and protecting species with the greatest conservation need.

To address these concerns, we are proposing an increase to a small number of Wildlife fees. This increase would move Ohio closer to the U.S. median cost for a fishing license and bring us more in-line with surrounding states. We are also requesting an increase in the cost of deer and turkey permits. We anticipate the proposed increases will provide approximately \$4 million in new revenue each fiscal year.

This revenue will allow for renovations and equipment upgrades to Ohio's state fish hatcheries, so they can continue to stock Ohio's public lakes with over 44 million fish annually. It will also provide for the addition of new public archery ranges and improvements to shooting ranges. It will also allow for the return of wildlife officers in every county. We are not seeking any additional GRF funding to support our Wildlife Division. We are also seeking approval of budget language that will allow the Division to promulgate rules adjusting license and permit fees in the future.

## **Public Land**

Our budget request includes increased appropriation authority for capital expenditures, including land acquisition. This will give us the flexibility to take advantage of important opportunities that may come available in the months ahead, including at the AEP ReCreation land. Currently, Ohio ranks very low on the scale of states in terms of public lands available for recreation, and we would like to make some bold progress in this area.

## **Division of Mineral Resources Management: Reclamation Forfeiture Fund**

Ohio's Reclamation Forfeiture Fund was established to reclaim mine sites when operators defaulted on their obligation to restore mined lands in accordance with Ohio law. Operators pay into the fund, creating a bond pool to pay for the costs of reclaiming mined lands where a mining operator has failed to fulfill his or her reclamation obligation.

While it is impossible to predict the future, a 2017 actuarial report published by Pinnacle Actuarial Resources, Inc. estimated that the Fund requires \$25.1 million to cover long-term exposure to bond-forfeiture liability. This study was commissioned by the Ohio Reclamation Forfeiture Fund Advisory Board. The budget bill proposes transferring \$2 million from GRF ending cash balances in each fiscal year into the fund. This additional funding will help to support reclamation efforts going forward and should restore the fund to a responsible level.

## **Division of Forestry**

Ohio is home to 21 state forests, encompassing more than 200,000 acres. The Division of Forestry manages these renewable forest resources for wildlife habitat, timber, and clean air and water. The Division also provides forest management assistance to public and private landowners throughout the state. Eighty-eight percent of Ohio's woodlands are on private land. Service foresters serve every county in Ohio. We also operate a significant urban forestry program, offering services to cities and citizens across the state. ODNR is asking for assistance to bring our state forester program up to the needed level to meet the current demand for these services.

## **Division of Water Resources**

The ODNR Division of Water Resources not only monitors Ohio's water inventory, but also does the very important work of inspecting and regulating Ohio's dams and levees. The Division of Water Resources also builds local and state capacity to support wise development of floodplains, reduce flood losses and contribute to the long-term viability of communities. We are requesting a modest increase in GRF funding for this Division for adequate staff to continue these important duties.

## **H2Ohio**

Finally, our budget request does include funding for the H2Ohio program to protect water resources across our state. While much of that focus will be on Lake Erie, we intend to use these funds to assist with water quality improvements and protections throughout the state. Water is Ohio's greatest natural resource. Therefore, it is crucial that we maintain a clean and abundant supply to enhance the lives of all Ohioans through consumption, recreation, and business.

Funding in the ODNR budget will be used to complete important coastal wetland projects that play a key role in filtering water flowing into Lake Erie. Science supports the conclusion that constructed wetlands can reduce phosphorus loading. And the opportunity to provide wildlife habitat is priceless. But we will not stop with Lake Erie wetland projects. We intend to expand these projects through the Western Lake Erie Basin watershed, and throughout the state. Upland wetland creation and development of wetlands in other key areas throughout Ohio will have the long term effect of protecting our waterways for generations to come. Through direct project management and development, and a grant program, we intend to intensify our efforts to bring this natural and effective water improvement program to waterways across Ohio.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for giving me the opportunity to testify about the great work of the Department of Natural Resources to ensure a balance between wise use and protection of our natural resources for the benefit of all. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.