

## Testimony of Bruce Tague, Sportsmen's Alliance to the Senate Finance Committee

June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my name is Bruce Tague with the Sportsmen's Alliance. We represent 41 different sportsmen's organizations who have joined the effort here in Ohio to urge the legislature and the governor to fix a building financial crisis facing the Ohio Division of Wildlife that is impacting quality habitat, access, hunting, fishing, trapping and recreational shooting in our state.

Most members will recall that the Division of Wildlife is funded nearly entirely by two sources: licenses and permits on hunting, fishing and trapping; and federal excise taxes on the purchase of firearms, ammunition, archery equipment and fishing gear. More than 95% of the agency's budget come from those two sources. Historically, to keep pace with increases in the cost of doing business, sportsmen and women would come down here about every ten years to ask the General Assembly to increase these fees so that we could continue to get the service we pay for. The last increase was in the 2003 biennial budget, and back then we committed we would not be back for ten years.

The roughly 10 year cycle worked without controversy until the 2013 budget when our folks were met with resistance for the first time due to politics. This scenario repeated itself in 2015, and sportsmen began to notice declining quality as the Division began to slow walk projects to make ends meet. In 2017 after an unprecedented intense battle, the General Assembly approved increases on non-residents, which are being phased in over a three year period. We are currently in the second year of that phase in.

The result has been a stunning backlog of projects that provide the value for the licenses we buy. Fish stocking, boat access, habitat improvements, shooting range repairs...all of these have fallen terribly behind.

Fortunately, HB 166 takes some big steps to improve things. We're very pleased the Senate has retained the resident fee increase. We're equally grateful to see the Senate has retained the funding that will enable ODNR to work toward securing the AEP Re-Creation lands. The lands, which represent 10% of all public hunting and fishing land in Ohio is a generational opportunity that seldom ever presents itself, and we're appreciative to see that funding remain.,

I'm here today to ask you for a compromise. The third sportsmen's priority item in the Governor's budget, retained by the House would allow the Chief of Wildlife the authority to make small fee increases to license and permit fees over time, to prevent the current approaching financial crisis from ever occurring again. Under this proposal a fee could only be raised with the approval of the Director of ODNR, along with the Governor; approval by the Ohio Wildlife Council, and of course sign off by JCARR, which provides the General Assembly a chokepoint that functions as a check and balance.

That language has not been retained in the Senate sub bill. Conversations with some senators indicate uneasiness with granting this authority, and we can certainly respect that. At the same time, Ohio sportsmen cannot go another 16 years before an increase without a decline in value that will do real damage to the future of hunting and fishing. To try to address the concerns of Senators, we propose an additional 2 prong check to prevent abuse of this authority. First, no fee, license or permit could be increased unless three years have passed since the last time that specific item was increased. And Second, no increase could exceed the rate of the Consumer Price Index for the timespan dating back to the last time the specific fee was increased. This compromise controls both the frequency, and the rate, providing one additional safeguard for Ohio sportsmen and women.

In total this, approach maintains the legislature's ability to moderate the executive branch in an overzealous scenario. The general assembly maintains its own authority over hunting and fishing license fees. And it adds another avenue to help prevent another unprecedented span of time from going by before badly needed costs of doing business adjustments are made.

It also will help the Division of Wildlife provide value for the cost of the licenses we buy. As paying customers we expect the product to be worth the cost, which is not currently the case with the existing backlog of work to be done. I thank you for your time, the help you've already given, and your consideration of our compromise. I can assure you our community will thank you for your leadership. Thank you.