

**Testimony of Rob Sexton, Sportsmen's Alliance
to the Senate General Government and Agency Review Committee
May 15th, 2019**

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my name is Rob Sexton, with the Sportsmen's Alliance. We are coordinating the efforts of 42 different sportsmen's organizations, that I have included in this packet. We are the paying customers of the state of Ohio's Department of Natural Resource's Division of Wildlife. And we have grown increasingly unhappy with the value of our purchase. We are here today to seek your help in fixing this problem.

For decades the Ohio Division of Wildlife had to be the easiest part of Ohio's budget. Sportsmen required very little if any GRF dollars, we were willing to pay our own way, and all we asked for in return was good quality habitat, wildlife, fishing and good access which we ourselves paid for. This agency is funded nearly entirely by license fees and permits and taxes paid on firearms, ammunition, archery equipment and fishing gear. Most years, the members of this committee would never even see us down here. Our folks are not very political and are much more comfortable in the woods than here in the Statehouse.

In the past about every ten years we'd come down here and ask our legislators to allow us to continue to pay our own way. Over time the cost of living increases would eat into the finances of the Division of Wildlife, and modest fee increases would be necessary to make sure that sportsmen and women continued to receive a good value for our license purchases. For literally decades this was an easy process, and the result was a win-win for everyone. Ohio hunters, anglers and trappers received good value for their money, and legislators never had to figure out how to fund the Division of Wildlife. In 2003 I was a part of the last time this took place. We testified in front of the Senate Finance Committee. There were the usual jokes about whether we were seriously asking them to raise our license fees, and then after learning that it was indeed true, the fee increase was approved for what we thought would be another ten years.

This every ten-year system worked up until 2013 when politics intervened. We encountered resistance for the very first time, and ultimately, we were not successful. This repeated itself again in 2015. In 2017, we had a partial victory as the General Assembly agreed to increase fees and permits on non-residents. Those fees are being phased in over three years, and we're now in the second of those three.

In the meantime, the Division of Wildlife reduced staff from around 525 around the year 2000 to today's agency of 406. Projects were slow walked or completely pushed down the road as time went on without additional revenue. These projects are part of the value I discussed earlier. Boat ramps. Shooting ranges. Fish hatcheries. Habitat work. All things that make hunting, fishing and trapping better, making our investment in the license worthwhile. While sportsmen and women began to receive less, the costs for the Division of Wildlife continued to rise. People receive more than one pay raise over a 16-year period. Retirement costs increase. And as you all know, health care costs increase. These costs are not approved by the Division of Wildlife, but rather by governors and the General Assembly.

We now have a funding regiment that is 6 years past its normal date of maturity, and the result is that we're fast approaching something that should never have been allowed to happen. The Division of Wildlife, without additional funding will basically become unable to perform the very duties it was created to do. These projects I referred to are an expectation by my fellow sportsmen and women for what we pay. We expect to have wildlife officers in every county and on

Lake Erie to protect our resources. We expect our biologists in the field manipulating habitat to create the best environment to produce abundant game. We expect our fish hatcheries to be running at full capacity to be able to stock fish each year. But unlike many agencies who expect things they're not able to pay for themselves, we expect those things, and are willing to pay to see them accomplished.

Today, we come to you with a request that you support the modest increases that are included in the budget, submitted by Governor DeWine, and approved by the House. Because the state has waited so long to take this action, it won't cure all of the financial woes faced by the Division of Wildlife, but it will go a long way. We also ask for your support for the authority for the Chief of Wildlife to be able to make small increases in the future, preventing this problem from occurring again. This authority includes three checks and balances. It could only occur by the approval of the Wildlife Council, the Director of ODNR, and of course through JCARR.

Finally, we ask for your support for the bond funds included in the budget that can be utilized to secure the AEP Re-Creation Lands in SE Ohio. This is a generational opportunity that once lost cannot be recovered. These are lands sportsmen and women have long had

access to. Securing these lands will do more than make hunters, fishermen and trappers happy. The average hunter spends \$1,400 per year hunting. Their money flows through restaurants, gas stations, convenience stores, hotels, ATV dealers, truck dealers, sporting goods stores, and much more. But their expenditures, depend on quality places to go hunt. The AEP grounds represent ten percent of available public ground in this state. The loss of this ground would be catastrophic to the future of hunting and harm many local economies that depend on our money each year in their communities.

Together, our coalition of 42 organizations is calling all of these requested items the Conservation Re-Investment Initiative. Much like our own houses require a new roof, or a new furnace every so often, our fish and wildlife require the same investments. But unlike so many who come before this committee, we're not asking for it all to come from you. We want to meet you halfway. We are asking you to support the funds for the AEP grounds. But we're also willing to pay our own way through our license fees and permits.

Efficiency and frugality are laudable goals for any government agency. However, a small and shrunken Division of Wildlife that is not able to meet the needs for which it was created is of no value at all

and would make its own customers wonder why they purchase a license or a permit. That's the point we're approaching after waiting sixteen years since the last time these fees were increased.

No one I know is clamoring to see their license costs increase. None of us. But we're all willing to pay for a good value, and that's what we're asking you to support in this budget. The witnesses that follow me represent a few of the coalition. We've worked together to provide different aspects of testimony to reduce repetition in respect for your time. Thank you for your attention today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.