

## General Government and Agency Review Committee

Testimony of Ohio chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers on the General Government and Agency Review Committee meeting on FY 20/21 related to ODNR

Organization: **Ohio chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers**

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Good afternoon Chairman Schuring, Vice Chairman Rulli, Ranking Member O'Brien and Committee. My Name is Tony Ruffing, I'm the Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Ohio Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers. I am a volunteer and represent not only my board, but nearly 550 members across the state of Ohio, and 36,000 members across the country. We are the fastest growing conservation organization in North America, representing a younger generation of sportsmen and women, with the 68% of our membership between the ages of 18-45. The mission of our organization is to maintain, promote and protect access to public lands and waters for public land owners so we can enjoy many outdoor recreation activities. In Ohio this can at times seem a daunting task, as we rank 44 in the country with 4.2% of our states land being open for public access, barely edging out Texas (4.2%) and Illinois(4.1%)\*

I first want to thank Governor DeWine for including the Conservation Reinvestment Initiative in his fiscal years 2020 and 2021 executive budget request. The proposed initiative can ensure that AEP ReCreation land, along with 10% of Ohio's publicly accessible land, stays public so many outdoor enthusiasts who depend on it for hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, and many other outdoor activities Ohioans enjoy have a place to recreate. This land is much more than a dot on a map. It's an economic driver to support Ohio's \$24.3 billion a year outdoor industry. It helps support 215,000 jobs directly correlated with outdoor recreation. Nearly \$7 billion in wages and salaries, and \$1.5 billion in state and local tax revenue. AEP's ReCreation ground provides acreage for agricultural production and pasture leases to graze livestock. Timber harvest and select cutting to provide building materials, as well as healthy habitat to promote our state's dwindling upland bird species. This land is an ecological niche, with an expanse of space that we lack in many parts of our state.

The numbers are presented black and white. What we put into our land, we get back financially as well as spiritually. Further research from the Outdoor Industry Association\*\* shows us that for every dollar we invest into conservation, we get a return two fold. This is more than just land for people to hunt and fish, this land is an investment in our state and its people.

I'm no one special. My story is probably similar to many you may hear today. I'm a business owner of a residential construction company. I'm also a livestock producer in Seneca County. I'm an outdoorsman, a hunter and a fisherman. My life is shaped and influenced by what the AEP ReCreation land has to offer. My father used to travel there to chase grouse. At the age of 12 I sat on top a ridge for my first turkey hunt. I've introduced others to the wonders of being outside on this land. Someday I hope to take my children there to hear a gobbler in the spring or observe the flight of a woodcock to see ducks on the water, and deer in the timber. I hope there's a future of this land that allows farmers to lease the available land to grow crops, and pasture space to raise

livestock. I hope there's a landscape that permits our Department of Natural resources and its divisions within it to perform its conservation work to continue providing some of the best habitat in the country. I hope Ohio remains a destination for outdoor enthusiasts from across the country to come and explore. Hunt our woods, fish our waters, hike our trails.

But this future is dim without the support of this committee, and our Representatives. That's why Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, along with over 30 other organizations from across the state are here today. We support Governor DeWine's fiscal years 2020 and 2021 executive budget proposal and more specifically and his Conservation Reinvestment Initiative. We support the fee increases, and we support H2Ohio initiatives. For the future of our sportsmen and women, we are here today to testify on its behalf. Without the support of this committee, and our representatives, none of the work that Director Mertz and the rest of the state's Natural Resource Divisions will be possible. This land is ours to lose. I hope you take all of this into consideration. Thank you for your time today.

\*-"The Complete Guide to Hunting, Fishing, and Cooking Wild Game: Volume 1"-Steven Rinella

\*\*-Ohio page, Outdoor Industry Association, <https://outdoorindustry.org/state/ohio/>