



Ohio Department of Natural Resources

MIKE DeWINE, GOVERNOR

MARY MERTZ, DIRECTOR

House Energy and Natural Resources Committee ODNR 101 Presentation Provided by Ohio Department of Natural Resources Director Mary Mertz March 29, 2023

Good morning Chairman Kick, Vice-Chair Lear, Ranking Member Rogers and members of the Ohio House Energy and Natural Resources Committee. My name is Mary Mertz, and I am the Director of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR). Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide you all an overview of the important work that we do at ODNR.

ODNR is a geographically diverse and expansive state agency consisting of 11 divisions that employ upwards of 2,400 individuals at the height of our busy season. In fact, you can find our employees in all 88 counties in the state. Our efforts help provide Ohioans with safe access to the state's beautiful and abundant natural resources that stretch from the islands of Lake Erie, through the rolling hills of the Hocking Valley, to the waters of the great Ohio River. Ohio is a magical place full of sites and wonders that we are excited to care for to ensure that the experiences we enjoy now remain available to all who call the Buckeye State home for years to come.

ODNR manages 75 (soon to be 76) beautiful state parks, 24 state forests, 142 nature preserves, and 150 wildlife areas across Ohio. Our properties continue to have increased attendance and unprecedented demand as Ohioans head outdoors.

Conservation and recreation are key pillars of our agency's success.

In 2022, we had a record-breaking one million overnight stays at our state parks. Overall, Ohio ranks 3rd in the nation for number of overnight cabins offered, and 4th for total number of lodges with overnight rooms and meeting spaces. Additionally, there were over 650,000 active watercraft registrations last year, including almost 340,000 paddle craft. This is nearly 10,000 more total registrations than in 2021, and Ohio now ranks 5th in the country in the number of registered watercrafts.

Our Division of Wildlife also issued 850,000 fishing and 360,000 hunting licenses last year, and we saw a decade-high whitetail deer harvest. Over 211,000 whitetail deer were harvested in the state. We haven't had deer harvest numbers that high since the 2012-2013 season!

The Division of Parks and Watercraft is responsible for overseeing the many recreational opportunities that our state parks have to offer! In our parks system, we have hiking, swimming, paddling, storybook trails, disc golf, mountain biking, bridle trails and so much more. Ohio state

parks' wide range of overnight accommodations has something for everyone. There are over 9,300 campsites that span from primitive to full service, over 500 cabins, and nine state park lodges, the newest of which being the Hocking Hills Lodge and Conference Center that we opened last October. Additionally, the Division of Parks and Watercraft manages watercraft registration for all Ohio boaters and has its own commissioned Natural Resources Officers who are responsible for the safety and security of park visitors on land and water, along with the protection of public property.

The Ohio Division of Wildlife is responsible for the management of Ohio's diverse fish and wildlife populations. The Division manages the fisheries in 124,000 acres of inland water, 7,000 miles of streams, 2.25 million acres of Lake Erie, and Ohio's portion of 481 miles along the Ohio River. The Division of Wildlife operates six state fish hatcheries, and in 2022, they stocked state and local waters with over 52 million fish. Stocked fish species included walleye, saugeye, channel catfish, hybrid striped bass, muskellunge, and rainbow trout. In addition to their fish management duties, the Division is also responsible for the management of the state's diverse wildlife populations. Every year, the Division works with the Ohio Wildlife Council to establish hunting and trapping regulations for whitetail deer, wild turkey, and other small game. The Division has the important responsibility of licensing hunters and anglers, while also preventing the spread of chronic wasting disease and other wildlife diseases. They oversee controlled hunting lotteries, and maintain our state shooting ranges. The Division also has Wildlife Officers across the state that are dedicated to upholding hunting and fishing laws and helping to educate the public on the best wildlife management practices.

The Division of Natural Areas and Preserves (DNAP) is responsible for the operation of a statewide system of state nature preserves, natural areas and scenic rivers, all of which protect the best remaining examples of Ohio's natural heritage. The Division's Scenic Rivers Program recognizes the unique characteristics of waterways and coordinates with state and local governments, organizations, and individuals to help preserve Ohio's best rivers. We will cut the ribbon on the Solon Woods State Nature Preserve in Solon on April 13th, which will be Ohio's 143rd state nature preserve. These diverse areas of land contain remnants of Ohio's pre-settlement past, rare and endangered species, and wondrous geologic features. While the majority of preserves are owned and managed by the State, some preserves are leased to local park districts for management.

The Division of Forestry promotes and applies management for the sustainable use and protection of Ohio's private and public forest lands. Ohio has around eight million acres of forested land, and private woodland owners hold 85% of that land. The Division not only ensures the responsible management of Ohio's state forests, but they also provide private landowners with advice and assistance in managing their private forests. Forestry also employs urban foresters to provide community officials and allied agencies with organizational and technical assistance to effectively manage trees and the land on which they grow to meet the community's local needs. The Division provides statewide leadership in wildfire management through fire department support programs, wildfire prevention efforts and promotion of prescribed fire as a resource management tool. Fire department support programs include the administration of the

Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) Grant Program. VFA grants for this past cycle funded 77 projects for a total of \$491,000. Also, through the Division's Trees to Textbooks program, a percentage of the revenue generated from state forest management activity goes to the county, township, and school districts in which the activity took place. Last year, 16 counties were able to share almost \$1.6 million from the responsible harvest of timber from Ohio's state forests.

ODNR also has multiple divisions that help manage our large, diverse portfolio of properties around the state.

The Office of Coastal Management is responsible for regulating, permitting, and leasing development along the Lake Erie shoreline. They manage and regulate Coastal Erosion Areas and salvage areas to ensure federal and state consistency. They also provide technical assistance and guidance to coastal property owners and municipalities when it comes to coastal erosion and coastal resiliency. The Office also administers a few of our grant programs, like the Coastal Management Assistance and Erosion Control Grant awards. Finally, they do research, administer our Coastal Training Program, and perform education and outreach from their headquarters at Old Woman Creek National Estuarine Research Reserve and State Nature Preserve in Huron.

ODNR's Division of Geological Survey is the state's oldest natural resources division, established by the state legislature in 1837 as the Geological Survey of Ohio. They study the state's geologic history and help provide important information about Ohio's past and where our natural resources are located. They study and track Ohio's earthquakes, and their findings are a part of important decision making when it comes to building and facility design, construction, insurance coverage, and other planning decisions made by the business community and local elected officials. Geological Survey also houses the state's Core Laboratory and Repository at Alum Creek State Park in Delaware, which contains over 6,800 core samples from all over Ohio that help tell our state's story.

The Division of Engineering (DOE) provides professional and technical engineering and related administrative support services required by the ODNR land-holding divisions in improving, utilizing, and managing their properties and associated resources. ODNR maintains a lot of infrastructure, and having our own engineering division is vital to our success. They handle all aspects of planning and implementing the department's Capital Improvement Program, provide engineering and architectural support to department facility managers and serve as department liaison with the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) on roadway maintenance projects.

With all our land-holding divisions, we also have a group of people that keep all of our properties in order. **The Office of Real Estate and Land Management (REALM)** provides real estate services and solutions for ODNR's landholding and natural resource-based programs, including services like land surveying and historical and cultural resources. Additionally, this office coordinates and provides environmental reviews on behalf of the Department involving large scale proposed public and private projects, and coordinates projects and management initiatives with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. REALM also coordinates several recreational grant programs, such as Clean Ohio, Natureworks, Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)

and the Recreational Trails Program. These programs are used by federal, state and local governments to expand outdoor recreational opportunities for all Ohioans. REALM also coordinates the distribution of state capital funds awarded for community recreation projects in the Capital Budget.

ODNR also has several divisions that regulate some important resources in our state.

Our Division of Oil and Gas Resources Management (DOGGRM) is responsible for the inspection and permitting of all oil and gas drilling and production throughout Ohio. They also oversee Class II (brine) injection wells and oil and gas waste disposal operations. The Division has oversight of the restoration and plugging of oil and gas wells in the state, which includes the Orphan Well Program. As a Division, DOGGRM has identified over 19,000 orphan and abandoned oil and gas wells, some of which date back over 100 years. We have found orphan wells in rivers and streams, under houses and roads, and even under school gymnasiums. In recent years, the Division has ramped up the orphan well plugging effort and will continue to do so with state funding and a significant influx of federal funds.

ODNR also has a **Division of Mineral Resources Management (MRM)**, and their job is to permit, inspect and enforce state laws and safety rules for mineral mining operations in the state. MRM oversees the state's mine safety program, which promotes safe mining practices for the protection of miners through inspections at mine sites, examination and certification testing, mine rescue support and safety training. The Division also administers the state's abandoned mine land (AML) reclamation program. This program addresses health and safety hazards by cleaning up land and water damaged by coal mining that occurred prior to today's stricter reclamation laws. Examples of AML projects include the reclamation of underground mine openings and dangerous highwalls, the prevention of mine subsidence, and the clean-up of acid mine drainage and burning coal refuse. This program is also receiving an influx of federal funds, and we estimate the program could receive up to \$696 million dollars over the next 15 years for this important work.

Finally, we have the **Division of Water Resources**, who has statewide oversight of dams, levees, and floodplains, and is responsible for the collection and management of data related to the state water resources. The Division's Floodplain Management Program provides technical guidance and assistance to communities by ensuring National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) compliance, evaluating local floodplain management programs, and coordinating with FEMA on flood hazard mapping initiatives. Water Resources oversees the state's Dam Safety Program, which ensures that life, health, and property are protected from dam and levee failures. The Division also oversees the Water Inventory and Planning Program, which is responsible for implementing and enforcing Ohio's rules, regulations, and contracts related to water supply and water resource development.

In addition to the other programs in the Division of Water Resources, we also have a team dedicated to our portion of **Governor DeWine's H2Ohio Program**. This program's goal is to ensure safe and clean water for all Ohioans. ODNR is responsible for addressing water quality using natural infrastructure in the form of wetlands. To date, ODNR has 141 projects either

completed or in progress, and the map you were provided gives you an idea of where our wetland sites are located throughout the state. In addition to asking for continued funding for the wetland portion of H2Ohio in the current budget bill, ODNR and OEPA are also seeking an expansion of the program to help protect Ohio's rivers.

Our agency is also committed to historic preservation. From Hope Furnace at Lake Hope State Park to Marblehead Lighthouse on the shore of Lake Erie, and even Lonz Winery at Middle Bass Island, we take our responsibility for the stewardship of these amazing places seriously.

One of the projects I am most excited about is the addition of Great Council State Park to our system. This will be Ohio's 76th state park, and it is located just north of Xenia in Green County. Great Council will be a connection to Ohio's indigenous and pioneer past. The area was once home to Oldtown, one of the largest-known Shawnee settlements in Ohio. This state park will bring to life the story of the Shawnee tribe and the frontiersmen and women through artifacts and stories, videos, and educational materials all on display at the new 12,000-square-foot interpretive center. The design itself is an homage to the Shawnee, built to resemble the traditional council house historically used by the Shawnee tribes. Inside, visitors will find three floors of exhibits, a theater area, a living stream, and a gallery. All these displays will honor the Shawnee tribes of the past and allow present-day visitors to share their stories and legacy. ODNR continues to work with the three federally recognized Shawnee Tribes to develop the property. We broke ground on the facility in May of 2022, and it is expected to open later this year.

Finally, with thousands of miles of trails, Ohio offers nearly endless opportunities to explore the outdoors. ODNR has an extensive portfolio of hiking, biking, equestrian and multi-use trails. We also boast 17 designated state water trails for the enjoyment of all. We have a trails app called DETOUR that aids trail users in planning their trips from the comfort of home prior to heading to our state parks. On the app, users can see not only maps of all the trails in our state parks, but also trails belonging to our many federal and local partners, like Columbus and Franklin County Metro Parks and Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

As you can see, our agency wears many different hats in serving the constituents of the great State of Ohio. We have accomplished many things in recent years and are excited to see what the future holds. We thank this committee and the entire General Assembly for your generous support in making what we do possible.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity speak with you this morning about the great work the Department of Natural Resources does as we strive 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.