

***Chad Harmon, Vice-President, Ohio Huskie Muskie Club
Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee Testimony
Operating Budget for Fiscal 2024 and 2025: House Bill 33, May 10, 2023***

Good morning, Chairman Schaffer and members of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resource Committee. I am Chad Harmon, representing the Ohio Huskie Muskie Club. We are the longest standing fishing club in Ohio, formed in 1961, and have members in every corner of the state. I currently serve as club vice-president and work as a muskie fishing guide. So, as you might guess, the statehouse is not where you would expect to find me on a spring day. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to the committee.

Muskellunge are native to Ohio and muskie anglers are a unique bunch. We fish for long hours seeking trophy fish that can exceed 40 or 50 inches and love to share those experiences with others. There is nothing more exciting than watching one of these huge fish following a lure to the boat or leaping out of the water once hooked. That is why, working as a fishing guide, I enjoy introducing muskie fishing to others as much as catching them myself.

The Ohio Huskie Muskie Club currently has 280 members, but the organization is about more than just fishing, tournaments, or trophies. We are rooted in a sense of community, youth and family participation, a love of the outdoors, and conservation. Members and their families routinely fish Ohio lakes, including places with state parks such as Alum Creek, Caesar Creek, CJ Brown, Pymatuning, Salt Fork, and West Branch, where muskie are stocked annually by the Division of Wildlife. We and our families often camp at these parks during our weekend events or summer vacations and depend upon quality, well-maintained facilities.

I am going to take the next few moments to express concerns that my organization has with the proposed operating budget and its impact on the Division of Parks and Watercraft and the Division of Wildlife, which are within the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR). I will cut to the chase here. My organization is concerned about reductions in the proposed ODNR budget that impact these divisions, our recreational opportunities, our safety, and conservation.

The proposed Parks and Watercraft budget request appears reduced by \$16 M in each of the next two years. Given the volume of use at state parks, the impact of inflation, and anticipated population growth, it is difficult to understand how ODNR can expect to maintain, let alone improve, facilities in Ohio State Parks without these funds. A sufficient ODNR budget is essential to meet operation needs and provide a safe place for outdoor recreation. To be specific:

- Our members rely heavily on campgrounds, boat ramps, and marinas and expect them to be up to par and have sufficient capacity to meet public demand without compromising outdoor experiences.
- Our members expect Ohio State Parks and our waters to be safe places to fish, boat, and camp, and we feel that sufficient numbers of properly staffed, trained, and outfitted Natural Resource Officers stationed in our parks and on the water are essential.

- Our members value boater safety courses, boat safety inspections, and on-the-water patrols, and do NOT want to see reductions in any of these areas due to insufficient funding.

The bottom line is that Ohio Huskie Muskie Club members enjoy Ohio State Parks, are proud of them, and support them, and would like to see similar appreciation from the legislature.

The Ohio Huskie Muskie Club also has a great appreciation of the Division of Wildlife and its dedicated efforts in fish and wildlife conservation. Our organization has learned that the current budget bill has removed a proposed \$2.5 M per year for habitat protection on public lands. Ohio is a state with very little public land, and again, on the cusp of an anticipated population boom, particularly in central Ohio. Habitat that is not managed and protected now may not be available to benefit fish and wildlife conservation in the future. As our population grows, the need for wise conservation will only increase. Now is NOT the time to reduce support for habitat protection.

Much like investing in habitat protection, investing in conservation education for our children is a downpayment on future stewardship. The current budget removes proposed funding for Project Wild, a Division of Wildlife program that brings conservation education to schools. Removing this support seems counter to Ohio's increased emphasis on education and does little to help Ohio prepare for the future. Future generations need an appreciation of the natural world and the wise use of our natural resources. The Ohio Huskie Muskie Club appreciates Project Wild and encourages the legislature to restore the proposed support for this program.

I would like to close with two final comments.

First, a moment ago I referenced the importance of habitat protection and conservation education. These go hand in hand. I would like to thank the Ohio legislature, ODNR, and its partners for continuing to support and implement the H2Ohio initiative for clean water. If you are interested in fishing, you are interested in clean water, and nothing says "good habitat" to fish like abundant and clean water. ODNR has continued to work toward improving water quality in Ohio through projects that restore and protect wetlands while improving fish and wildlife habitat and communicating a conservation message. I hope this work continues and expands well into the future.

Second, I would like to reiterate my concerns about key funding removed from House Bill 33 that results in shortfalls of what is necessary to support the ODNR Division of Parks and Watercraft and the ODNR Division of Wildlife. I urge you to revisit these needed investments in our near, and long-term future, and consider them a budget priority.

Mr. Chairman and Committee Members, thank you for this opportunity to express concerns of the Ohio Huskie Muskie Club.