

**House Bill 33 Testimony: Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee**  
**Stephen Coulter, Ohio Bass Federation**  
**May 10, 2023**

Good Morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resource Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts regarding House Bill 33, the proposed State Operating Budget, and what its impact on the Ohio Department of Natural Resources will be for the next two years.

I am Stephen Coulter of the Ohio Bass Federation. From 2001 to 2011 I was the OBF's state tournament director until I became President from 2011 to 2022. I am currently the State Tournament Director again. I am a retired Law enforcement officer after 33 years but still hold a commission with the department as a reserve officer. I own and operate a waterfowl guide service as a US Coast Guard Captain at Lake Erie and the Ohio River. I am the only licensed waterfowl guide on the Ohio River licensed by West Virginia. I have had the pleasure of hunting or fishing in over 30 states and three countries outside the United States.

The Ohio Bass Federation is the largest bass fishing organization in Ohio. We have over 400 adult members and over 150 youth members in over 40 clubs in six regions. As a group, we are dedicated to engaging youth in fishing, fish and wildlife conservation. We are avid tournament anglers and frequent visitors to Ohio State Parks and host many events each year at State Park lakes, Lake Erie and the Ohio River. Through these events we promote competitive fishing but also make significant contributions to local economies throughout Ohio.

I am here today to show appreciation for [H2Ohio](#), Ohio's clean water initiative and share some concerns about parts of the currently proposed state budget and its impact on the Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

Let's start with H2Ohio. The Ohio Bass Federation is pleased to learn of the proposed expanded support for H2Ohio during the next two years. Since H2Ohio first began, the program's long-term investment in clean water through wetland restoration and protection has aligned with our core value of fish and wildlife conservation. Good fishing requires good habitat and clean water is the most fundamental and essential part of fish habitat. I have witnessed first hand the impact an H2Ohio project made on the water quality at Brooks Park at Buckeye Lake. The project cleaned up the runoff from surrounding farmland so that the water is clearer going into the lake. We appreciate and support Ohio's dedication to H2Ohio and compliment ODNR on effectively using these funds. We hope to see these annual commitments to our clean water continue and become permanent and grow into the future.

Now let me get to the real reason that I am testifying today. I am concerned about some budget items that I understand to have been reduced in the Ohio Department of Natural Resources budget for the next two years. These include budget items for the Division of Parks and Watercraft and the Division of Wildlife.

In the Division of Parks and Watercraft there has been observed an increase of public use of Ohio State Parks and their facilities. Routine inflation makes a robust budget essential. However, I understand that the original budget request was reduced by over 16 million for each of the next two years. I do not understand why this is necessary when outstanding needs are so apparent with the useage that Ohio State Parks get every day. Ohio State Parks reflect on every one in Ohio and benefit evrryone. Reductions in the proposed budget will negatively impact public safety within parks, boater safety on the water, staff and equipment needed to maintain quality facilities , and the ability to fund special projects.

Our membership feel strongly that public safety through adequately staffed, trained, and supported ODNR Natural Resource Officers is essential to safe outdoor recreation on land and water. Our events often include family and youth participation. It is clear to us that a safe enviroment is important to broadening participation and we want everyone to feel safe in our parks. Reduced funding may likewise limit watercraft safety through scaling back educational programs, safety inspections, equipment needs, and routine patrols. Although our members are mostly skilled and experienced boaters we do operate on waters where other boaters may not have the same experience or regard for safety. Reduced funding for Natural Resource Officers will impact staffing, training, and public safety, in addition to future hiring to maintain a mininum staffing of officers.

We also have significant concerns about maintaining and improving facilities such as boat ramps, courtesy docks, Marinas and campgrounds if funding is insufficient. Visitation at Ohio State Parks and parks-owned lakes like Buckeye, Indian and Grand Lake St. Marys clearly continue to increase. Operation and maintence of parks facilities require staff, equipment, and routine replacement of fleet vehicles, otherwise deterioration and backlog of needs will increase. We are pround of Ohio's State Parks and want to see them continue to be good places to hold events and take families.

The one other matter that will impact fisherman the most in the reduction of the budget in HB33 is that I understand that \$1 million has been eliminated for funding of vegetation control of Indian Lake. Aquatic vegetation has gotten out of control at Indian Lake and although the division has been working hard to handle the matter there is a need for additional funding. Parts of Indain Lake that were open to boat traffic can not be navigated due to weed growth. Boaters are also blowing up their motors as the vegetation clogs the wtaer cooling system. We ask that this funding be restored. Moderate amounts of vegetation is certainly good for fishing but the amount of non-native vegetation taking over Indian lake is not. When vegetation gets too bad boaters will go elsewhere and this can cause overcrowding on other lakes.

Regarding Division of Wildlife funding there are items of concern. One is eliminating proposed funding for Project Ohio in our schools and and support for habitat protection and restoration. Earlier I noted that the mission of the Ohio Bass Federation focuses on youth, conservation and fishing. Project Wild directly supports conservation education in our schools to inform and inspire future generations of conservation enthusiasts and we hope build the ranks of future anglers. If installing a conservation ethic in youth is one cornerstone of protecting the future of our natural resources then another is investing in habitat. More than 90% of Ohio land is

privately owned and habitat quantity and quality are the largest factors influencing the health of fish and wildlife populations. HB33 eliminates \$2.5 million in each fiscal year for habitat efforts. We feel that is bad for the division as well as worse for that State of Ohio.

Chairman Schaffer and Committee Members. I thank you for your time and this opportunity to share these views and concerns. Please keep doing the good work that you do as a member of the Ohio legislature.