



**Testimony of Director Mary Mertz  
Joint Senate & House Agriculture Committee at the Ohio State Fair  
August 1, 2023**

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Good morning, Chairman Schaffer, Chairman Creech, and members of the Joint Senate & House Agriculture Committee. I am Mary Mertz, Director of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR), and it is great to be back at the Ohio State Fair with all of you and a big thanks to Governor DeWine, Lt. Governor Husted, and the General Assembly for your continued support of our work on behalf of Ohio's great outdoors.

I appreciate the opportunity to highlight some of the work we've done recently and to give you a preview of some of our exciting plans for the future. There are many successes I could discuss, but I would like to focus today on a few important initiatives and projects that highlight our partnership with the agriculture industry.

**Ohio State Fair Investments**

First of these successes is our wonderful Natural Resources Park here at the Ohio State Fair!

The ODNR team has managed to squeeze all the magic of ODNR - the outdoor sports and recreation, the wildlife, the science, the history, and the fun - into 8-acres, for 12 days, for hundreds of thousands of Ohioans - right here at the fairgrounds.

One of our newest attractions is our new Bald Eagle Enclosure on the Wildlife Boardwalk. This eagle is from our raptor center at our new Hueston Woods State Park Nature center, and we are excited to enable visitors to view and appreciate wildlife, including this majestic bird. This, along with the aviary and the butterfly house, continues to be a big draw for families and wildlife enthusiasts who may not see these animals in their natural habitats.

Sustainability, conservation, and preservation are a big part of what we do at ODNR. We have added signage to the Natural Resources Park to show how we are implementing a program called "ConServe Ohio" at our state parks. This program lays out new sustainability practices that each park strives to carry out on a daily basis, and makes an effort to show people what we are doing to promote conservation.

We want people to keep our state parks top of mind year-round, with so many activities available to them during all seasons, including the holidays. In our giftshop, we showcase the new "Christmas at the State Fair Display" that not only offers a piece of Ohio State Parks in the form of a new tree ornament, but also promotes our state parks passport and winter opportunities many people may not be familiar with.

One of the most important things we are trying to accomplish at the ODNR Park is to make it available to Ohioans outside of Fair time. We have worked really hard to bring in school groups and other youth groups to take advantage of all the great things we have - archery, shooting, the geological walk, the

prairie, the amphitheater and more – during non-Fair times. This asset is too great to only use for a few weeks each year.

### **H2Ohio Past and Future Successes**

I also want to share with you a quick update on H2Ohio. In partnership with the Ohio Department of Agriculture, Ohio EPA, and the Ohio Lake Erie Commission, ODNR continues to make strides implementing Governor DeWine's H2Ohio Initiative.

In the recently passed biennial budget, ODNR received \$30.76M each fiscal year for the H2Ohio program. We will continue to use this funding to invest in natural infrastructure, or wetland projects, adding to the 141 projects we already have completed or are in progress. We have already identified a number of wetland projects in northwest Ohio and are moving to get those into contract. And we have also announced the grant programs for the rest of the state. Applications are due August 25<sup>th</sup>.

Many of the H2Ohio wetlands will provide outdoor recreation opportunities for hunting, trapping, fishing, birding, walking, or paddling. We are pleased to work with so many local partners to bring these projects to life, including local park districts, soil and water conservation districts, land trusts, and many more.

Another new, exciting expansion of the H2Ohio program is the H2Ohio Rivers Initiative. This initiative is designed to improve water quality, ensure community health, protect wildlife, and provide opportunities for recreation in and along Ohio's rivers.

In the budget, ODNR received \$15.86M each fiscal year for the H2Ohio Rivers Initiative, where we will monitor and collect data, work to restore river health where it has degraded, and protect those rivers and river corridors identified as healthy. We are already moving to put those dollars to work and starting the internal process of identifying the right projects.

### **First Term Accomplishments and Future Investments**

Finally, I would like to highlight some of our biggest accomplishments over the past four years. Thanks to Governor DeWine and all of you in the General Assembly, ODNR has made tremendous strides in providing the best outdoor recreational experiences for visitors near and far, while also protecting and conserving our state's most precious natural resources.

At the beginning of this administration, we began the process to acquire over 50,000 acres of new public land, now known as Appalachian Hills Wildlife Area in southeastern Ohio, providing even more opportunities for high quality outdoor recreation.

Since 2019, ODNR has designated 21 Storybook Trails, bringing books to life for children and families by blending the fun of outdoor exploration with reading. We also opened our very first Haiku Trail earlier this summer!

During the first four years of this administration, we have dedicated eight new state nature preserves including Solon Woods, the first state nature preserve in Cuyahoga County.

Last October, the new Hocking Hills Lodge & Conference Center celebrated its grand opening. The lodge

showcases heavy timber framing with panoramic views of the surrounding woodlands. Moreover, we have been busy renovating nearly all of the other lodges. This process takes time, but most will be revamped by the end of this year, with some back of the house work remaining.

This summer, we opened a beautiful new marina building at Mosquito Lake to serve the needs of our boaters, anglers, and visitors! We also opened the new Shawnee State Ohio River Park, Campground, and Marina to provide recreational enthusiasts an opportunity to enjoy the beautiful Ohio River, with a variety of amenities for day users including a kayak paddling loop, splashpad, playground and fitness area, archery range, and trails.

We also re-opened the Magee Marsh Visitor Center during a celebration of the Governor's Bird Ohio Day. A unique blend of wetlands, lake, and forested beach ridge habitat at Magee Marsh Wildlife Area is a tremendous asset to wildlife.

Additionally, under this administration, 744 orphan wells have been plugged and 432 wells are in contract to be plugged. Under the Abandoned Mine Land program, 120 projects have been completed and 700 acres have been reclaimed. Both these programs and their respective divisions are key in protecting all Ohioans and our environment, while ensuring the state's abundant natural resources are managed properly.

As you all can see, we have accomplished a lot over the first four years and have a lot to be proud of. We have big plans for the future and continue to make great advancements, and we look forward to working with you all. Thank you again, Chairman Schaffer, Chairman Creech, and members of the Joint Senate & House Agriculture Committee, for allowing me to provide testimony this morning. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.