

House Committees

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Sponsor Testimony

H.B. 312: To Designate the Walleye as the Official State Fish of Ohio

Chair Miller, Vice-Chair Hiner, Ranking Member Jarrells, and members of the House Arts, Athletics, and Tourism Committee – thank you for allowing us to present H.B. 312 - a bill that will finally designate the walleye as the *o-fish-ial* fish of the state of Ohio.

The idea for this bill *spawned* from a constituent email sent to me by Parma angler **MATTHEW KOWALESKI**. I told him to give me a few days *walleye think it over*...But, I was soon *hooked*...

The information that Representative Swearingen and I are about to present prove the case that the walleye – sander vitreus – is the only choice to be Ohio’s official state fish and that considering naming any other fish as such would be a *red herring*.

Ohio has an official state fossilized fish – the Dunkleosteus, state fossil, fruit, cultivated flower, wildflower, bird, tree, gemstone, beverage, song, rock song, insect, mammal, reptile, frog, and amphibian, but we are only one of three states, including Indiana and Iowa, that does not have an official state fish.

This, despite being home to nearly 30,000 miles of rivers, 60,000 miles of streams, and 312 miles of Lake Erie shoreline. In fact, although it is smallest of the Great Lakes, with only 2% of the total water volume, roughly 50% of the fish found throughout all of the Great Lakes call Lake Erie home. Further, roughly 20 million pounds of fish are harvested annually on Lake Erie making it the largest freshwater commercial fishery in the world.

Getting its name from its pearlescent eyes, which are due to a layer of tissue, the tapetum lucidum, which reflects light through the fish's retinas to improve its night vision, the National Wildlife Federation already considers the walleye the unofficial fish of Ohio and thousands of folks from around the world come to Ohio annually to fish Ohio's Walleye Trail. In fact, Jason Fischer who leads up the Lake Erie Walleye Federation, which puts on multiple big money walleye tournaments, explained that walleye, more than any other fish, bring anglers to Ohio from around the country and world, which in-part is why Ohio's portion of Lake Erie is already known as the walleye capital of the world. The Ohio Marine Trades Association echoed these sentiments in proponent testimony last General Assembly on H.B. 599.

We even have the Toledo Walleye professional hockey team, Port Clinton celebrates the annual Walleye Festival and hosts the Walleye Drop on New Year's Eve, and there's the Wine and Walleye Festival in Ashtabula Harbor, among other events.

Thriving in the cool waters of Lake Erie and the Ohio River, their tributaries like the Maumee River, our state parks, including Mohican and Salt Fork, stocked reservoirs and lakes, such as Pymatuning, Mosquito Creek, Apple Valley, and Buckeye, the economic impact of the toothy, glossy-eyed, white-bellied, olive- and gold-colored sportfish generates over \$1 billion for the Buckeye State each year – unmatched by any other fish.

In fact, according to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, the statewide fishing effort for all fish statewide has an approximate economic impact of \$5.5 billion per year. Further, it is estimated that the total economic output of sports fishing in the Ohio portion of Lake Erie is valued at \$1.19 billion with 71% of the total sport fishing effort of private and charter boats on Lake Erie directed toward walleye. In fact, walleye support about 950 fishing charter guides in Ohio, which "is not matched anywhere in the country," according to Ohio Department of Natural Resources Hall of Famer D'Arcy Egan. Quite simply, there is no other fish more sought after in Ohio than the walleye with about half of Ohio's 1 million anglers fishing for them.

According to the Ohio Division of Wildlife, there are 72.1 million walleye in Lake Erie at least 2 years or older, ready to be caught and kept. In comparison, there are roughly 600,000 white-tailed deer – our state mammal - across Ohio. Thus, there are over 150 times more walleye in Lake Erie than there are deer in Ohio.

Designating a state fish highlights its ecological importance. This recognition can justify funding for conservation programs, habitat restoration, and related scientific studies.

Grants for fisheries, wildlife preservation, or environmental education often favor projects with community or cultural significance. An official state fish can strengthen grant proposals by demonstrating the species' value to the state's identity and ecosystem.

A state fish often becomes a focal point for eco-tourism, fishing, and public education campaigns. Funding agencies often see this as an opportunity to invest in projects with economic and community benefits.

Federal and private agencies offering grants for environmental or educational purposes prioritize states that show commitment to conservation through symbolic designations, including naming a state fish.

All of these reasons are why H.B. 599 passed unanimously in the House committee and 94-4 on the House floor last G.A. And, so far this G.A. members have not been *koi* about supporting this bill, as we have 49 co-sponsors.

I want to thank my *co-captain* Representative Swearingen who represents Erie and Ottawa counties, where I grew up and used to often fish as a young boy. In fact, I caught a Fish Ohio Walleye in 1986 off of Put-In-Bay and still have the certificate from my winning fish.

Last General Assembly we came close to *netting* this big fish, but it *floundered* because we ran out of time. Let's work together to *reel* it in this time and not let this bill *be another one that got away*.

Thank you for your *cod-sideration*.