



**House Natural Resources Committee  
Testimony in Support of House Bill 96 – FY 2026-2027 Operating Budget  
Provided by Ohio Department of Natural Resources Director Mary Mertz  
February 19, 2025**

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Good morning, Chairman Jones, Vice Chair Blasdel, Ranking Member Rogers, and Members of the House Natural Resources Committee. My name is Mary Mertz, and I am the Director of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR). Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on our department's operating budget request.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources is a geographically diverse and large state agency. Consisting of eleven divisions that employ almost 2,600 men and women at the height of our busy season, ODNR staff and properties can be found in all 88 counties of Ohio.

I want to thank the General Assembly for your support over the last biennium – your support makes it possible for us to accomplish our mission to protect our natural wonders and bring the outdoors to Ohioans. Last year, we celebrated the agency's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. If any of you attended any of our events last year – whether it be a groundbreaking, winter hike, fishing at the State Fair, or any other event – you would have felt the importance of that anniversary to our current and former employees, stakeholders, and the public. The celebration gave us an opportunity to highlight the legacy of conservation and outdoor recreation in Ohio since 1949.

The outdoors is a significant driver of Ohio's economy. Hunting, fishing, hiking, boating, camping, and so much more bring people to our state and local communities. These people visit our communities' stores to buy supplies, eat at the restaurants, and stay at the hotels. A 2022 study found that hunters, anglers, target shooters, and wildlife watchers generate an estimated \$12.5 billion in annual economic activity. These activities boost local and state tax revenue by \$1 billion each year.

Another economic study on the impact of our parks in 2024 found that Ohio State Parks visitors brought \$392 million in direct spending to our facilities and \$39.3 million in state and local tax revenue was generated by parks visitors. A 2022 Ohio Marine Trades Association/ODNR economic impact study found that boating generated **\$6.4 billion** to our economy.

Most of ODNR's operations are supported by revenue from sources other than the General Revenue Fund. In fact, just 23% of the department's budget is supported by the General Revenue Fund. The ODNR budget request is \$696.3 million for FY 2026 and \$733.6 million for FY 2027. The GRF portion of that amount is \$156.3 million in FY 2026, and \$175.9 million in FY 2027 – virtually flat when compared to FY 2025. This budget request allows us to continue improving recreation and conservation, providing wise regulatory oversight, and maintaining our H2Ohio water quality initiatives.

## **Division of Parks and Watercraft**

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources is proud that Ohio is one of only eight states in the nation to have no admission fee – our parks are **free** and **accessible for all**. As I stated earlier, the state parks system is an important component of Ohio's tourism industry and serves as a key economic driver for local communities.

Our budget requests **no increase in GRF** across the biennium for the Division of Parks and Watercraft. Instead, we ask for access to the funds awarded from bonus payments on oil and gas lands leasing activities in state parks. Thus far, the Division was awarded just under \$60 million from those one-time bonus payments. Last General Assembly, \$20 million was approved for expenditure via the Controlling Board at Salt Fork State Park in accordance with the requirement in statute that at least one-third of those funds be used at the park where the leasing occurs, specifically for capital improvements.

We are now requesting \$20 million in appropriations of these bonus payment dollars for each fiscal year. One of the most important uses of these funds would be to help recruit more law enforcement officers in the Division to ensure the safety of our guests at our parks. We, like other law enforcement agencies, are facing an uphill battle to recruit and retain officers, and this funding will be vital in our efforts to bolster our ranks.

The funding would also be used to purchase more equipment for our officers, replace outdated vehicles in the Division, pay for increased payroll costs associated with the recent collective bargaining agreement, and help with the overall cost of doing business, such as utility costs.

Finally, the budget includes some legislative changes to the fees charged for registering watercraft, which have not changed since 1994. The fees would increase by the Consumer Price Index rate and would not be effective until 2027.

## **Division of Wildlife**

The Division of Wildlife also requests a flat GRF budget for the biennium, maintaining appropriations for overhead costs. Most revenue and spending from the Division come from licenses, fees, fines, and federal sources – a small fraction of the overall Division budget is made up of GRF dollars.

Like the Division of Parks and Watercraft, the Division of Wildlife seeks to access one-time bonus payments from oil and gas leasing activities on division land. The \$3 million in FY 2026 would be used to bolster our conservation efforts in the state.

The Division also seeks to maintain their commitment to retain existing license fee rates for Ohio residents. At the same time, we are requesting to increase our non-resident hunting and fishing license fees to be more competitive with surrounding states.

Currently, our non-resident hunting and fishing license fees are below most neighboring states. For example, Michigan non-resident fees are \$190, and Indiana's are \$550. The changes we are seeking in the budget include increasing the non-resident hunting license from \$74 to \$210. Additionally, non-

resident fishing licenses will be increased to also keep pace with surrounding states. These fee changes will maintain our commitment to Ohio residents, while bringing in additional revenue to continue managing our fish and wildlife populations, public lands, and waterways.

### **Division of Water Resources**

The work of the Division of Water Resources is critical for the safety of Ohioans and to ensure the sustainability of our water supply. Three-quarters of the revenue and spending for the division is based on dam permitting fees and fines, and federal funds. The budget request reflects an increase in GRF to account for additional operational costs at the division.

It is vitally important to our state that we understand our water supply – this information is invaluable to developers and businesses when making important decisions on where to locate their business operations. To bolster this program, this budget requests \$750,000 within our GRF line to be utilized for additional capabilities to keep up with demand for prospective businesses for up-to-date information on Ohio's water supply.

Additionally, this budget requests user fees for major water withdrawers in the state. Currently, those withdrawing over 100,000 gallons of water per day, must register with the Division of Water Resources. Major water withdrawers must seek a permit. The changes would seek to impose a nominal registration fee on water withdrawers and increase the one-time fees for major withdrawal permits from the Ohio River Basin and Lake Erie Basin from \$1,000 to \$5,000. These changes would put Ohio on par with fellow Great Lakes states.

### **Division of Forestry**

In the last budget, the General Assembly appropriated funds for the Buckeye State Tree Nursery in Zanesville, and I thank all of you for your support. The Division has worked hard to get the nursery operating and seedlings in the ground, and we are on our way to producing seedlings this spring. The Division's hard work has allowed us to request a slight decrease in funds for the program, which will provide the ability to maintain the work we are doing at the nursery.

The Division is also a statewide leader in wildfire management through fire department support programs, wildfire prevention efforts and promotion of prescribed fire as a resource management tool. Additionally, our foresters occasionally assist other states in fighting wildfires, like our team did in California earlier this year. An increase in appropriation - which is funded by revenues from timber sale revenues, federal grants, GRF, and other sources – will allow the Division to continue their support of rural fire departments and other forest management activities.

### **Division of Oil & Gas Resources Management**

The Division of Oil and Gas Resource Management's operating budget is completely funded from non-GRF sources, like oil and gas severance taxes, and proposes a modest 3.4% appropriation increase due to continued operational costs and an increase in staffing for the Orphan Well Program, as well an increase in federal funding available to the Division.

The Orphan Well Program was established in 1977 to plug abandoned oil and natural gas wells, and Ohio's program is recognized as one of the best in the nation. These abandoned wells date back decades and have not been maintained, nor built to the same standards as we have today. From 2013 to 2018, there was a total of 124 orphan wells plugged. From the beginning of the DeWine administration, 1,310 orphan wells have been plugged – last year the Department plugged 411 wells, doubling the amount plugged in 2022. While this is an impressive achievement, we are still working to grow the number of wells plugged to 500 wells in calendar year 2025 to protect the health and safety of Ohioans.

### **Division of Mineral Resource Management**

The Division of Mineral Resources Management is responsible for managing the environmental and safety aspects of the coal and industrial mineral mining industries and administering the federal and state abandoned mine land program to reclaim abandoned coal mine lands. Both programs are funded by severance taxes levied on mining operations. These state and federal funds provide resources for the Division's Abandoned Mine Land Program to investigate, design, and construct projects to address the environmental, public health, and safety problems related to abandoned mines.

The Division is requesting an increase in the Coal and Mine Safety Programs line item for additional operational costs associated with our coal mine regulatory activities.

### **Division of Natural Areas and Preserves**

With a goal of preserving Ohio's best land and water resources, the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves oversees 147 dedicated preserves in 58 counties, protecting more than 32,000 acres of some of the state's most precious natural features. The Division also oversees the scenic rivers program, consisting of 16 designated scenic rivers, totaling 831 river miles, in 32 counties, and protecting nearly 6,300 acres of streamside habitat.

Most of the funding for the Division comes from GRF – other sources include Ohio Nature Preserve license plates purchases, waterways safety fees, and income tax checkoffs. The Division requests a modest increase in GRF funds for increased operational costs for invasive species management and additional educational programming.

### **Geological Survey/Coastal/Engineering/Real Estate**

The Division of Geological Survey receives most of their funding from severance tax revenues from various minerals and other mined resources like salt, coal, limestone, and oil and natural gas, and a relatively small amount of funding from the federal government. A language item in the bill modifies the oil and gas severance tax ratio from 90 percent for the Division of Oil and Gas and 10 percent for the Division of Geological Survey, to 84 percent to 16 percent. This increase allows the Division to cover additional operational costs.

The Division of Coastal Management receives about half of their money from federal sources, and the other half from permit fees for submerged lands and royalties from salt leases under Lake Erie. Federal funds are used for state-federal partnerships to manage the Lake Erie coast and conservation efforts,

and permit funds are used to support construction projects along the Lake Erie coast and provide technical assistance to locals in the region.

## **H2Ohio**

Since Governor DeWine created H2Ohio with generous support from the General Assembly, ODNR tirelessly worked to improve wetlands and river health across the state. To date, we have initiated 203 wetland projects and restored thousands of acres of wetland and water-quality focused natural infrastructure. Our Rivers Initiative team has cleaned up nearly 200 linear miles of river in one year and removed hundreds of thousands of pounds of trash. We are asking for a flat budget amount for this biennium.

## **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you again for giving me the opportunity to testify about the great work of the Department of Natural Resources as we strive every day *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.