



Opponent Testimony on HB 540

Presented to the Ohio House Ways and Means Committee

by

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Chairman Roemer, Vice Chair Thomas, Ranking Member Troy, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 540. My name is Gail Hesse, and I am the Great Lakes Water Program Director for the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) based in Ohio. The National Wildlife Federation is America's oldest and largest conservation organization.

I am here today to strongly oppose HB 540. Conservation organizations exist to facilitate public engagement, education and stewardship, helping citizens understand the importance of biodiversity, ecosystem services and sustainable resource use. Conservation lands provide direct access to these functions for the benefit of the environment, the public and local economies. Local communities benefit from conservation land within their county by lessening the need to make their own investment in conservation lands while realizing multiple values to their community.

The National Wildlife Federation is committed to providing opportunities for all to access conservation lands for a wide array of outdoor activities for hiking, fishing, hunting, birdwatching, education, science and more. These activities bring people to local areas, bringing with them resources that contribute to local economies. As reported by the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, the Bureau of Economic Analysis calculates that in 2023, outdoor recreation generated \$19.3 billion in Ohio and accounted for more than 147,900 jobs (<https://recreationroundtable.org/resources/national-recreation-data/>). Nationally, the outdoor recreation economy grew three times faster than the U.S. economy as a whole. Conservation lands of more than fifteen thousand acres within a county are clearly providing economic benefits to local areas and beyond.

Ohio is far behind other states in providing public land and conservation lands. Combining public and conservation land acreage owned by federal, state and conservation organizations along with land trusts and easements total 1,508,000 acres in Ohio. Conservation organizations own 113,000 acres of that total. In contrast, the combined total acreage in Michigan is 9,152,000 acres with conservation organizations owning 192,000 acres (The Land Trust Alliance). This bill could push Ohioans to travel outside of the state for recreation and taking their tourism dollars with them. Ohio should be working on ways to enhance public access and availability – not remove incentives to acquire and own conservation lands. This bill will undermine Ohio's

economy and provide a boost to other neighboring states that welcome and incentivize conservation lands.

Requiring payments from nonprofit conservation organizations to local governments compromises a conservation organization's ability to fulfill their conservation mission by diverting resources for payments to local governments. Such a requirement not only reduces capacity for mission delivery but compromises the public trust that grants nonprofit organizations their tax-exempt status. By law, nonprofit organizations must reinvest available resources back into their mission, not make payments in violation of their tax-exempt status. Calling it a payment in lieu of taxes does not change the reality that the organization must expend valuable resources and violate their tax-exempt status simply for being a landholder.

We need nonprofit organizations to continue to invest in landholdings to optimize the environmental and community benefits and not dissuade future investments.

As an Ohioan, environmental professional and outdoor enthusiast, I know the value of conservation land. Conservation organizations should not be subject to unwarranted payments to local governments. I urge members of the committee to reject HB 540. Chairman Roemer and Members of the Ways and Means Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on HB 540.

Gail P. Hesse
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