

Ohio Senate Finance Committee
Am. Sub. H. B. No. 96 – Interested Party Testimony
Submitted by Larry Fletcher, President/CEO, Shores & Islands Ohio
May 28, 2025

Chair Cirino, Vice-Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and all members of the Senate Finance Committee,

I am here today representing Shores & Islands Ohio, which is the destination marketing organization for Erie and Ottawa Counties. I'm sure many of you on this committee have visited this area, as it is one of the most popular tourism destinations in the Midwest, and certainly equally as popular as a location for people to live and work.

Visitors are attracted to our region for a variety of reasons including Cedar Point, waterparks, special events, youth sports, waterfront communities, and what I am focusing on today, outdoor recreation. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) is a critical partner in our region and across the state in protecting and promoting our outdoor recreation assets.

I am here today advocating that this committee support ODNR's budget request including use of the \$40 million in bonus payments on oil and gas leases, funds necessary to address many needs including replacing outdated equipment, ensuring current law enforcement requirements are met, and accommodating increased operational costs.

All who live in, work in, and visit the Shores & Islands region benefit in some way from sites managed by and resources protected by one or more ODNR departments. I am confident the same can be said for all parts of the state.

Looking at just our partnership with ODNR's Division of Parks and Watercraft, I am proud to say we have eight Ohio State Parks in our two-county area, five of which are on islands. They range in size from East Harbor, that at 1,831 acres with over 500 campsites is the largest in the state park system, to the smallest, the 1.5-acre Oak Point on South Bass Island. These eight parks attract millions of visits annually, a combination of Ohioans and out-of-state guests, and these visits generate hundreds of millions in economic impact.

Our region also includes 14 ODNR-managed wildlife areas. Just a few weeks ago, an event called Bird Ohio Day was held at one of these, the Ohio Division of Wildlife Magee Marsh in Oak Harbor. ODNR Director Mary Mertz and many other ODNR officials were there to celebrate the significant contributions that ODNR makes in protecting Lake Erie and habitat along its shoreline, that at this time of year, is particularly important for migrating birds.

Each year, millions of birds and upwards of 80,000 visitors from across the country and many other parts of the world visit northwest Ohio and, in the process, generate an estimated \$40 million in economic impact.

In a couple of months, Fish Ohio Day, an event focusing on Lake Erie fishing will take place in the Port Clinton area. Anglers in Ohio generate an estimated \$5.7 billion in impact annually. The western basin of Lake Erie would not be known as the *Walleye Capital of the World* without ODNR's fishery management and resource protection efforts.

With over 150 miles of Lake Erie shoreline in our two-county region, and all the other outdoor recreation amenities in our area, there is rarely a week that passes without someone from our staff team interacting with a member of the ODNR team. These interactions show the breadth of the positive impact that the various divisions of ODNR have on our region of Ohio, and my counterparts across the state would be able to produce similar lists.

Some recent examples include:

- Hearing the outstanding 2025 fishing forecast from Division of Wildlife Fisheries Management experts at the Lake Erie Charter Boat Association Conference.
- Celebrating Ohio's focus on sustainable marina management at the ODNR Office of Coastal Management/Ohio Sea Grant Ohio Marina Conference.
- Celebrating the H2Ohio Program's milestone of supporting over 200 wetland projects across the state.
- Working with the team at the Castalia State Fish Hatchery to install an underwater webcam in the outdoor trout run.
- Attending the ribbon cutting at the restored Lonz Mansion on the grounds of Middle Bass Island State Park.
- Taking our staff team to tour recent renovations and enhancements at the Glacial Grooves site on Kelleys Island.

And these are just some of the ways our organization and region benefit from just a few of ODNR's many divisions. ODNR's work across Ohio results in significant benefit to our health and well-being; our quality of life; our ability to attract out-of-state visitors, business owners, and future residents; and our safety and security while enjoying the outdoors.

ODNR's work also contributes greatly to generating spending and associated tax dollars for Ohio. In addition to the birding and fishing impact I mentioned, Ohio's recreational boating industry contributes \$6.4 billion in annual impact, hunting \$2 billion, and wildlife viewing another \$1.7 billion. ODNR's work is critical to all these activities.

Accommodating the demand for outdoor recreation in Ohio, and maintaining progress with critical natural resources protection efforts such as H2Ohio, requires strong funding for ODNR. I urge this committee to recommend approving ODNR's budget request so the department can continue providing quality experiences and significant economic benefit for the state.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony, and thank you to all on this committee for your work on behalf of all Ohioans.