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Bill Analysis

Version: As Introduced

Primary Sponsor: Rep. Pizzulli

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SUMMARY

- Requires the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' (ODNR) Division of Parks and Watercraft to conduct a study to evaluate the creation and expansion of all-purpose vehicle (APV) and side-by-side riding opportunities across Ohio.
- Requires ODNR's Division of Wildlife to conduct a study to evaluate the feasibility of reintroducing elk into Ohio's state forests and wildlife areas.
- Requires the Divisions to hold at least one public meeting to present study goals and collect feedback and solicit written input from certain stakeholders.
- Requires ODNR to submit a comprehensive report of the studies to the General Assembly and the Governor by December 30, 2028.
- Appropriates \$2 million in FY 2026 from the General Revenue Fund (GRF) to conduct the side-by-side trail expansion study and \$1 million from the GRF in FY 2026 to conduct the elk reintroduction study.
- Names the bill the "Trails and Tails Act."

DETAILED ANALYSIS

Side-by-side trail expansion study

The bill requires the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' (ODNR) Division of Parks and Watercraft to conduct a study to evaluate the creation and expansion of all-purpose vehicle (APV) and side-by-side riding opportunities across Ohio. An APV is any self-propelled vehicle designed primarily for cross-country travel on land and water, or on more than one type of terrain, and steered by wheels or caterpillar treads, including vehicles that operate on a cushion of air,

vehicles commonly known as all-terrain vehicles, all-season vehicles, mini-bikes, and trail bikes.¹ A side-by-side, also commonly known as a utility task vehicle (UTV), is a multi-passenger off-road vehicle with seats side-by-side and are typically used for work, recreation, and hauling purposes.

The bill allows the Division to conduct the study in consultation with state universities, local governments, and relevant stakeholders. It must use Shawnee State Park, East Fork State Park, and Salt Fork State Park as primary study sites. The study must include all of the following:

- A geographic and environmental assessment to identify terrain types suitable for side-by-side use. The assessment also must include an environmental impact analysis and assess seasonal weather effects and trail durability.
- An economic and social impact assessment to estimate the potential tourism revenue, local business growth, job creation opportunities, and permit and trail pass revenue potential. The assessment must include a cost-benefit comparison of trail construction, operation, and maintenance.
- A safety and enforcement analysis that establishes standards for trail width, visibility, and speed limits. The analysis also must evaluate emergency access routes, signage, and communication coverage. The Division must coordinate with local law enforcement to recommend enforcement protocols. It also must review noise, dust, and emissions standards to ensure environmental compliance with all applicable laws.
- A public use and conflict management assessment that includes proposals for zoning or temporal separation of uses and identify designated quiet or wildlife zones adjacent to trail systems. The assessment also must recommend seasonal or rotating trail closures to protect sensitive habitats. In conducting the assessment, the Division must survey trail users for input.
- An economic development and tourism integration assessment that includes statewide economic modeling of projected tourism and tax impacts. The assessment must include developments for branding opportunities, assess potential for interstate trail connections and integrated tourism corridors, and evaluate partnership with local tourism bureaus, chambers of commerce, and private outfitters.
- An infrastructure and funding assessment to provide cost estimates for trail construction and grading; parking and staging areas; signage, safety, and wayfinding systems; wildlife fencing and protecting features; and visitor education kiosks and interpretive displays. In conducting the assessment, the Division must explore federal and private funding opportunities, including the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration's Recreational Trails Program and the Appalachian Regional Commission. The assessment also must evaluate the Division's capacity for ongoing maintenance and collaboration with volunteer trail clubs.²

¹ R.C. 4519.01(B), not in the bill.

² Section 1.

Elk reintroduction study

The bill also requires ODNR's Division of Wildlife to conduct a study to evaluate the feasibility of reintroducing elk into Ohio's state forests and wildlife areas. The Division may conduct the study in consultation with state universities, local governments, and relevant stakeholders. The study must include all of the following:

- A habitat suitability assessment to identify candidate zones based on size, vegetation, forage, shelter, and water access. The assessment must utilize geographic information system mapping of public and adjacent private lands to evaluate habitat connectivity. It also must assess human proximity to a proposed habitat and identify natural and man-made migration barriers.
- An ecological impact assessment to evaluate potential effects on biodiversity, native vegetation, and species interactions. The assessment must assess potential soil, forest, and water impacts from elk movement and grazing. It also must analyze the risk of crop damage and mitigation strategies and determine compatibility with existing wildlife management zones and deer hunting practices.
- A risk analysis for chronic wasting disease, bovine tuberculosis, and other transmissible diseases. The analysis must include veterinary health screening and quarantine procedures for any translocated elk. The Division must coordinate its findings with the Ohio Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.
- A source population and logistics analysis to identify donor states, analyze transportation methods, mortality risks, and relocation costs, and to evaluate genetic suitability, appropriate transfer seasons, and acclimation procedures.
- A management and monitoring analysis to model regional carrying capacity and long-term population growth. It must include proposals for management strategies, including potential limited hunting seasons. The analysis also must develop annual monitoring, collar-tracking, and public reporting procedures.
- A fiscal and economic evaluation to estimate the costs to the state and potential return on investment through license sales, tourism, and related tax revenues. The evaluation must include cost estimates for wildlife fencing and protection features, visitor education kiosks, and interpretive displays. In determining those cost estimates, the Division must explore federal and private funding opportunities, such as the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Fund. The Division may collaborate with state universities, such as The Ohio State University and Shawnee State University, for ecological and tourism impact research.³

³ Section 2.

Feedback and report

In conducting the side-by-side trail expansion study and the elk reintroduction study, the Divisions must hold at least one public meeting to present study goals and collect feedback. Prior to the final submission of each study, the Divisions must provide for a formal public comment period on the draft report. They also must solicit written input from all of the following:

- County commissioners;
- Farm bureaus;
- Local tourism boards;
- All-purpose vehicle associations;
- Wildlife conservation organizations; and
- Hunting and angling groups.

ODNR must submit a comprehensive report of the studies to the General Assembly and the Governor by December 30, 2028. The report must include at least all of the following:

- Maps of candidate areas for elk reintroduction and side-by-side trails;
- Economic and environmental assessments;
- Cost estimates and funding strategies;
- Stakeholder feedback summary; and
- Legislative and rulemaking recommendations.⁴

Appropriations

The bill appropriates \$2 million in FY 2026 from the General Revenue Fund (GRF) to conduct the side-by-side trail expansion study and \$1 million in FY 2026 from the GRF to conduct the elk reintroduction study.⁵

Trails and Tails Act

The bill is named the “Trails and Tails Act.”⁶

⁴ Section 3.

⁵ Sections 4 and 5.

⁶ Section 6.

HISTORY

Action	Date
Introduced	01-12-26
