



Ohio Department of Natural Resources

MIKE DeWINE, GOVERNOR

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House Finance and Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources
Testimony in Support of House Bill 33
Provided by Ohio Department of Natural Resources Director Mary Mertz
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Good morning, Chairman Jones, Ranking Member Troy, and Members of the House Finance and Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources. 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 budget request.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources is a geographically diverse and large state agency. Consisting of eleven divisions that employ almost 2,500 men and women at the height of our busy season, ODNR staff and properties can be found in all 88 counties of Ohio. Our efforts help provide Ohioans with safe access to the state's beautiful and abundant natural resources that stretch from the islands of Lake Erie, through the rolling hills of the Hocking Valley, to the waters of the great Ohio River. Ohio is a magical place full of sites and wonders and it will take continued care and investment to ensure that these experiences we enjoy now remain available to all who call the Buckeye State home.

Following the pandemic, Ohioans have returned to their normal lives, but we still continue to see increased attendance at ODNR properties, especially at our state parks, nature preserves, and wildlife areas. In 2022, we had a record-breaking one million overnight stays at our state parks, and we continue to see more than two million Ohioans hunt and fish. This is why maintaining and protecting Ohio's natural assets for the benefit of our citizens is a priority.

We have accomplished a lot in the past four years, but we know there is still a lot to be done and we're excited to talk about the great things we have planned for this next biennium, including the continuation and expansion of the H2Ohio initiative, the reopening of our state tree nursery, and continued strengthening of our state park system.

Most of ODNR's operations are supported by revenue from sources other than the General Revenue Fund. In fact, just 27% of the department's budget is supported by the General Revenue Fund.

The ODNR budget request is \$655.9 million for FY24 and \$652.5 million for FY25. However, the GRF portion of that amount is only \$175.0 million in FY24, and \$171.6 million in FY25. Most of the funding is to continue current operations. The budget proposal we present today for ODNR is focused on improving recreation and conservation, providing wise regulatory oversight, and continuing to grow our H2Ohio water quality initiatives.

Division of Parks and Watercraft

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources is proud that Ohio is one of only seven states in the nation to provide free admission to our state parks. Our state parks system is an important component of Ohio's tourism industry and serves as a key economic driver for local communities.

According to the most recent report completed by Tourism Economics, Ohio State Parks generate nearly \$450 million in business sales, nearly \$60 million in taxes, and supports more than 4,500 jobs. We have had record-breaking years and we expect the demand to stay high. ODNR is committed to providing safe, high-quality recreational experiences for all visitors, which requires continued investment. We are requesting a \$16 million increase from the previous budget, totaling \$57.3 million per fiscal year in GRF funding for our park system. These funds will be directed to much needed maintenance and personnel to support our state parks.

Ohioans have spoken, whether they're hiking the Buckeye Trail, paddling around a Lake Erie Island, or mountain biking at Mohican State Park – they want to be outside and they want to connect with nature. We see that at our state parks and continue to have unprecedented demand. With one million overnight stays last year and 650,000 active watercraft registrations, Ohio is third in the nation for number of overnight cabins offered, and fourth for total number of lodges with overnight rooms and meeting space.

We want to stay on top of the list, but that means making investments in properties and people. We will be adding staff to support some of our newer ventures like Jesse Owens State Park in eastern Ohio, and the soon-to-come Great Council State Park in western Ohio.

Jesse Owens State Park is a success story in environmental stewardship, conservation and reclaiming land for outdoor recreation. A popular hunting area, the park offers numerous campgrounds, fishing, hunting and spectacular hiking.

Great Council State Park will be a connection to Ohio's indigenous and pioneer past. The area was once home to Oldtown, one of the largest-known Shawnee settlements in Ohio. This state park will bring to life the story of the Shawnee tribe and the frontiersmen and women through artifacts and stories, videos, and educational materials all on display at the new 12,000-square-foot interpretive center. The design itself is an homage to the Shawnee, built to look like the form of the traditional council house historically used by the Shawnee tribes. Inside, visitors will find three floors of exhibits, a theater area, a living stream, and a gallery. All these displays will honor the Shawnee tribes of the past and allow present-day members to share their stories and legacy. ODNR continues to work with the three federally recognized Shawnee Tribes to develop the property. We broke ground on the facility in May of 2022, and it is expected to open later this year.

As a very important part of the request mentioned above, we also plan to hire additional Natural Resources Officers. These individuals are not only the division's commissioned first responders; they are often the face of the department. Officers are responsible for safety and security of park visitors on land and water, as well as protecting public property. While state parks and waterways are generally safe settings, visitors feel safer knowing there is an officer in the vicinity to call if there are issues, especially those unaccustomed to the remote locations and natural, rustic settings of a state park. Additional officers would extend hours of enforcement coverage to heavy use periods (into the evening hours) when overnight visitors may experience conflict. These officers are also responsible for patrolling our state forests and nature preserves.

In addition to the request mentioned above, we are also requesting a Parks & Watercraft Federal Grants Fund, that will serve as a revolving fund for federal grant expenses and reimbursements. With additional federal funds available, we do not want to miss the opportunity to apply for and receive grants. As most federal grants are reimbursable, we are looking at these funds to provide the upfront project costs, and then the fund will receive the federal reimbursements. We are asking for a one-time cash transfer from the Oil & Gas Well Fund of \$9.4 million that will serve as “seed money” for the Parks and Watercraft Federal Grants Fund.

The Division is also requesting another one-time cash transfer of \$16 million from the Oil & Gas Well Fund to the State Parks Maintenance Fund. This funding will be used to purchase new vehicles for the Division. Many of the Division’s fleet are well past the state’s mileage salvage requirement and are quickly becoming unsafe. In total, 446 of the 672 vehicles the Division owns meet salvage requirements, and the requested funding will purchase approximately 356 vehicles. We are looking to replace the worst of the worst. We currently have law enforcement officers who share trucks and are constantly replacing parts. In some situations, the cost to replace a part is more than the cost of the vehicle itself. This funding is to simply equip the Division with safe, reliable vehicles that will help them serve the people of Ohio better.

We have an amazing park system in Ohio. Our areas are first class, and we want to keep them that way. We are committed to using this investment to provide exceptional outdoor recreation and boating opportunities by balancing outstanding customer service, education, protection and conservation of Ohio’s state parks and waterways.

Division of Forestry

Ohio is home to 24 state forests, encompassing more than 200,000 acres. A lot of that came from the little things you have in your hand-seedlings. The Division of Forestry manages these renewable public forest resources for wildlife habitat, backcountry recreational opportunities, some timber production and clean water. We want our forests to not only thrive but survive. We need seedlings not only for state forests, but to use in reclaimed abandoned mine land, in cities and in our parks and other conservation areas. Unfortunately, Ohio currently does not have any public or private tree nurseries that provide seedlings, and we buy our seedlings from Indiana, Michigan, and West Virginia. To solve that problem, a portion of this budget request will be used to reopen the Buckeye State Tree Nursery near Zanesville. Currently this nursery is operated by a private business. We will continue to lease the property to them but will access an unused area. Within three years we believe we can produce a million seedlings per year. We are requesting \$3 million to purchase necessary equipment, develop seedling production houses, grow seedlings, and refurbish existing Division of Forestry nursery infrastructure.

Did you know – eighty-five percent of Ohio’s woodlands are on private land? That is equal to 7 million acres of forest. Part of our budget request would provide the Division of Forestry with the tools and the staff to help these private landowners grow healthy forests and make good decisions about woodland futures. We are requesting a \$2.5 million increase that will allow ODNR to hire more state service foresters to assist in this process.

The Division of Wildlife

Ohio has world class opportunities for hunting, trapping, and fishing – we are in fact the walleye capital of the world! ODNR manages 150 wildlife areas that cover more than 260,000 acres of public land, 124,000 acres of inland water, and 7,000 miles of streams, all managed by the Division of Wildlife. Conservation is key and to keep it going, we need to inspire young people to care about these areas as much as we do. That’s why we are requesting a \$2 million per year increase for Project WILD.

Project WILD is a national program that was introduced in Ohio in 1984 and involves young people and wildlife. The program emphasizes awareness, appreciation, and understanding of wildlife and natural resources. We target this program to Ohio's elementary schools. The hands-on, diverse activities help develop problem-solving and decision-making skills in determining responsible human actions. Project WILD is endorsed by the National Council for the Social Studies, is consistent with the recommendations of the National Science Teachers Association, and its curriculum has been aligned with Ohio's academic content standards in science. Trained facilitators conduct educator workshops for educators annually around the state throughout the year, and activity guides are available to educators for free.

This additional funding will help train more facilitators, who then train educators, and provide more Project WILD guides and other teaching materials to educators and students. It also allows facilitators and nonprofits to provide stipends and/or grants for the cost of workshops and establishes and supports more Project WILD-WILD School Sites with schools throughout Ohio. The WILD School Sites program is an "action extension of Project WILD," meaning students and educators take what they learn from Project WILD and apply it to the creation of wildlife habitat on their school grounds.

Finally, the Division is requesting language in the budget that allows college students who are not from Ohio to buy hunting and fishing licenses at resident prices, promoting fishing, hunting, and trapping to more people who normally wouldn't participate in these activities, due to higher, non-resident costs.

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 142 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 15 designated scenic rivers, totaling 831 river miles, in 32 counties, and protecting nearly 6,300 acres of streamside habitat. Over the last four years, the Division has been able to protect nearly 2,300 new acres, including six new state nature preserves and five new scenic river properties. The Division has focused its efforts on installing new educational signage to help visitors better understand and appreciate all of Ohio's incredible biodiversity. Under the last budget, the Division was able to replace or install numerous trail structures to improve public access, and plan to install an additional four new ADA trails.

The modest increase we are requesting will allow for more invasive species management and additional educational programming.

Division of Oil & Gas Resources Management

The Division of Oil and Gas Resources Management's operating budget has a modest 3.4% increase, due to continued operational costs and an increase in staffing for the Orphan Well Program. With the recent passage of the federal Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act, the Division will be receiving \$25 million for the Orphan Well Program, and will need additional spending authority for these funds which is reflected in our budget request.

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 most well-funded and organized in the nation. These abandoned wells date back decades and have not been maintained, nor built to the same standards as we have today. This request is about protecting the health and safety of Ohioans. From 2013 to

2018, there was a total of 113 orphan wells plugged. From the beginning of this administration, 636 orphan wells have been plugged and 249 wells remain in contract to be plugged – that is a lot of progress. This new federal funding combined with Ohio's already robust state funding will allow an unprecedented opportunity for the next decade, with \$634 million in potential funding through 2035.

In the budget, there is also a language request for the Division of Oil & Gas to have clear regulatory authority over stratigraphic wells, which includes permitting, drilling, and plugging of stratigraphic wells. Stratigraphic wells are wells drilled for the purpose of researching the subsurface geology to determine the suitability of the rock formations for production of hydrocarbons, injection of CO₂, injection of brine, and other similar purposes. In particular, stratigraphic wells are an important component for the testing of geologic formations associated with carbon sequestration. Current oil and gas law does not clearly state the Division's authority to regulate stratigraphic wells. To protect public health, safety, and the environment, the proposed regulation would ensure that these wells are properly permitted and constructed, and after testing is complete, the wells are properly plugged. The language also would ensure that the companies permitting and constructing a stratigraphic well are bonded and insured.

Division of Mineral Resources Management

The Division of Mineral Resources Management, while responsible for managing the environmental and safety aspects of the coal and industrial mineral mining industries, also administers both a state abandoned mine land (AML) program and a federal AML program to address the highest priority problems resulting from coal mining that occurred prior to enactment of today's stricter reclamation requirements. 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.

Similar to the Division of Oil & Gas, the Division of Mineral Resources Management received a large increase in federal funding from the Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act. The Division will be receiving an additional \$46 million for the AML program and needs the spending authority for these funds. This new federal funding combined with Ohio's state funding will allow an unprecedented opportunity for the next decade, with \$696 million in potential funding through 2036.

In addition, the Abandoned Mine Land Economic Revitalization (AMLER) Program, will continue to focus on projects that have a positive economic effect on Ohio's coal region. Ohio is one of six states that receives AMLER grants, and this program is receiving \$11 million in federal funding, and will need additional spending authority for these funds as well.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, 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.