

Proponent Testimony for Increased Funding for Ohio Division of Forestry in the 2024-2025 Budget Bill

Good morning!

My name is Paul Mechling. I am here today to support the increased funding in the 2024-2025 Budget Bill for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Division of Forestry. This proposed increase in funding is essential for the Ohio Division of Forestry to help fulfill its mission of promoting and applying management for the sustainable use and protection of Ohio's private and public forest lands.

My background: I am a retired veterinarian having practiced 40 years in northeast Ohio and northwest Pennsylvania. I operated two veterinary clinics- one in Ashtabula County, Ohio and one in Erie County, Pennsylvania serving both large and small animal clients. I am also a tree farmer and grain farmer. Our 460-acre Snowy Oak Tree Farm in Pierpont Township, Ashtabula County produces quality northern hardwoods as well as maple syrup. My brother and I operate Wal Mec Farms in Hopewell Township, Perry County. Between the two farms I manage 500 acres of woodlands and 300 acres of cropland. I have been recognized for my conservation work with the following awards: 2016 induction into Ohio's Forest of Honor, 2018 Ohio Conservation Farm Family, 2019 Ohio Tree Farm of the Year and 2020 ODNR's Cardinal Award. I have been elected to 9 terms on the Ashtabula Soil & Water Conservation District Board of Supervisors. I currently serve two Governors' appointments – Ohio Forestry Advisory Council (3rd term) and the Ohio Wildlife Council (4th term).

Ohio is blessed to have over 8 million acres of forest – just over 30% of the state's land area. We have some of the finest hardwoods in the world – walnut, hickory, red and sugar maple, tulip poplar, black cherry, red and white oak. Seven million acres or roughly 85% of these forest acres are owned by private individuals. The Ohio Division of Forestry services both private and public (state & national) forests. The total revenue of Ohio forests is a 28-billion-dollar industry. Holmes County, Ohio is the number one furniture producing county in the United States.

Not only do Ohio's forests produce jobs and economic revenue to Ohio citizens but many other benefits:

1. Clean water – Ashtabula County has 4 scenic rivers (Grand, Ashtabula, Conneaut, & Pymatuning) the 2nd most of any county in the U.S.
2. Clean and filter air
3. Produce the oxygen we breath
4. Remove carbon dioxide from the air and sequester carbon in wood and soil
5. Buffer Climate Change
6. Provide wildlife habitat
7. Recreation – hunting, fishing, bird watching, mushroom gathering, hiking, xc skiing
8. Aesthetics, mental therapy, “forest bathing”

9. Wood products – lumber, furniture, pulp, biomass

Funds included in this budget request will ensure that we reach more private woodland owners with critical forestry information in a timely manner so they can make informed decisions. The Division of Forestry has service foresters who work with landowners to manage their woodlands in a sustainable manner. Currently 22 service foresters work our 88 counties. Some states have a state forester in each county. Funds in this budget request would provide more service foresters in the heavily forested areas of Ohio. The Division's "Call before you Cut" program provided by service foresters would allow private landowners to make better decisions in sustainable timber harvesting and selling their timber. This budget request will enhance outreach efforts to our youth through "Project Learning Tree" (being taught in our schools) and the Ohio Woodland Journal being placed in school libraries.

Ohio woodlands are being attacked by a variety of non-native invasive plants, foreign insects and disease. Chestnut trees have been killed by the chestnut blight fungus. Elm trees are nearly extinct because of the Dutch elm fungus. Oak trees are being killed by the oak wilt fungus. Foreign insects are killing beech, sugar maple, hemlock, walnut, and ash trees. Invasive plants such as Ailanthus, multiflora rose, glossy buckthorn, privet, bush honeysuckle, burning bush, Japanese barberry, and Asiatic bittersweet are over taking and preventing our native hardwood seedlings to regenerate our woodlands. Our service foresters are the first line of defense in assisting private woodland owners in identifying and managing these foreign plants, pests and diseases.

The Ohio Division of Forestry thru education seminars and service foresters connects woodland owners to real estate tax savings programs. Ohio Forest Tax Law and Current Agriculture Use Valuation (CAUV) are programs utilized by landowners with the advice of service foresters. Not only does the Ohio Division of Forestry save woodland owners real estate taxes but they help woodland owners participate in federal Farm Bill conservation programs such as Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). These programs provide federal funding for forestry practices on private lands such as crop tree release, invasive plant control, timber stand improvement and wildlife habitat enhancement. These practices improve the value and quality of Ohio forests.

Another public service the Ohio Division of Forestry provides is the support for rural volunteer fire departments by helping with wildfire suppression, training, equipment and grant money. Over 13,000,000 acres of Ohio land receive this support and protection.

The 2024- 2025 Budget Increase for the Ohio Division of Forestry would include funding for the re-establishment of a state tree seedling nursery. Back in 2004 I was able to purchase 28,000 tree seedlings from the Marietta tree nursery operated by the Ohio Division of Forestry. This allowed me to purchase tree seedlings at a fair price and begin my tree farm management plan. Soon after I began tree planting projects, the state tree seedling nurseries were closed. If

a state tree seedling nursery were re-established, land owners would be ensured access to tree seedlings of the right species for private tree planting projects as well as providing seedlings to reforest reclaimed coal mine lands of eastern Ohio.

In conclusion, the Ohio Division of Forestry contributes many benefits to the state – probably more benefits than most people realize. I hope my testimony today may help the Ohio legislature value all the benefits the Ohio Division of Forestry provides for the common good of Ohio’s citizens and that the legislature provides the increased funding requested. I consider our Governor as an outstanding Conservation Governor. As Aldo Leopold the father of modern conservation principles once wrote, “When man and land are in harmony, we have conservation”.

Thank you,

Paul P. Mechling, DVM