

A right to hunt and fish? Ohio lawmakers float new constitutional amendment

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Ohioans may decide next year whether they should have the right to hunt and fish.

State lawmakers proposed a constitutional amendment that, if passed, would guarantee the ability to "hunt, fish, and harvest wildlife that are traditionally pursued." The measure has its first committee hearing Wednesday and will need support from three-fifths of the House and Senate to appear on the ballot.

Rep. Ron Ferguson, R-Wintersville, said he hopes to put the question before voters in November 2024. Backers of redistricting reform are also targeting that election for their proposal to create a citizen mapmaking commission for congressional and statehouse districts.

"I believe hunting and fishing is a right," Ferguson said. "It's something that we've done since the dawn of time, before governments ever existed."

Twenty-one states, including neighboring Indiana and Kentucky, established the right to hunt and fish in their state constitutions, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. The Ohio proposal describes hunting and fishing as a "valued part of Ohio's heritage" and notes it would not infringe on property rights.

There's no imminent threat to either activity in Ohio, but Ferguson said hunters and fishers are concerned about the potential for restrictive federal orders. He also pointed to Oregon, where a group put forward a ballot initiative that would remove exemptions for hunters in the state's animal cruelty laws.

Skeptics of these amendments, including animal welfare groups, have said the concerns are overblown and do not believe hunting and fishing should be in state constitutions.

Ohio has seen at least one attempt to regulate hunting. In 1977, voters defeated a proposed amendment that would have banned any trapping device "causing prolonged suffering." Rob Sexton of the Sportsmen's Alliance cited that vote when he testified in favor of the failed effort to make it harder to amend the Ohio Constitution.

"Our willingness to pay license fees and taxes on hunting and fishing gear finances our system of fish and wildlife conservation that makes America the envy of the rest of the world," Sexton said during the March hearing. "We don't ask for applause. We do so gladly. But what we don't deserve is to have our rights put up for sale to the highest bidder bringing their out-of-state values to change how we live."

Ferguson said he initially planned to introduce the amendment sooner, but he wanted voters to first settle Issue 1 in August. One Democrat – Rep. Sean Brennan of Parma – is cosponsoring the measure, and Ferguson said he's talked with lawmakers on both sides of the aisle who support it.

"It's never the wrong time to do the right thing," Ferguson said, "and I think we should really get ahead of it."