

The one that keeps getting away: Lawmakers renew decades-long push to make the walleye Ohio's state fish

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COLUMBUS, Ohio—As far as high-profile bills go at the Ohio Statehouse, a proposal to make the walleye the official state fish of Ohio is a small fry.

The idea, advanced with bipartisan support, is that the toothy, olive-gold fish deserves to be on the list of Ohio's official state symbols, along with the Ohio buckeye (the state tree), the white-tailed deer (the state animal), and the ladybug (the state insect), among many others.

While Ohio has a state *fossil* fish – [the long-extinct *Dunkleosteus terrelli*](#) – the Buckeye State is one of three states not to have an official state fish (Indiana and Iowa are the others).

Yet, for more than a quarter century, Northern Ohio lawmakers from both parties have been trying to land it without success. They came closest last December, when the Ohio House passed a walleye bill, but despite no opposition testimony (and a flurry of news coverage gleefully stocked with fish-related puns), the Senate didn't bite before session ended.

But state Reps. Sean Brennan, a Parma Democrat, and DJ Swearingen, a Huron Republican, are now trying again, introducing [House Bill 312](#) last week.

Their arguments have remained the same: Sport fishing on Lake Erie is a \$1 billion industry, and the most popular catch is the [89 million adult walleye](#) swimming in the lake -- the largest naturally reproducing walleye population in the nation.

The lake is [touted](#) as the "Walleye Capital of the World" (a title claimed elsewhere in the Midwest as well), Port Clinton hosts an annual [Walleye Festival](#), Toledo's minor-league hockey team is called the Walleye, and walleye are served at countless restaurants and fish fries around the state. The Lake Erie walleye fishing culture has been deemed an "insane cult," to [quote one outdoor magazine](#).

“The walleye – sander vitreus – is the only choice to be Ohio’s official state fish,” Brennan said in legislative testimony last year. I’m really serious about this. I really believe the walleye should be our state fish. It’s time that we did this, and that considering naming any other fish would be a red herring.”

In an interview, Brennan said that beyond the symbolic nature of his bill, recognizing the walleye as Ohio’s state fish would bring practical benefits to the state’s walleye fishing industry – generating news coverage and boosting state publicity efforts.

“I’ve even had environmentalists reach out to me and say that it can help them when they’re working on grants for their organizations,” Brennan said.

But similar bills introduced in the last few decades have all floundered. Not all have promoted the walleye: [the Ohio House passed legislation in 2003](#) to make the smallmouth bass the state fish, but it went belly up in the Senate.

The main reason for the opposition to such bills is geographic. Walleye are most plentiful in the lake’s shallower and warmer western basin, between Toledo and Huron. Farther east, off the coast of Northeast Ohio, there are still plenty of walleye to be found, but there are also other fish, like perch and steelhead. In the rivers of Southern Ohio, meanwhile, bass are far more plentiful than walleye.

As a result, many state lawmakers who aren’t from Lake Erie’s western basin are hesitant to support a bill that recognizes a fish from outside their region. Their reaction is roughly the same as Cleveland lawmakers would have to a bill crowning the Cincinnati Bengals as the official football team of the entire state of Ohio.

One of those opponents is state Rep. Jamie Callender, a Lake County Republican who thinks the perch should be the state fish of Ohio.

Callender noted that state lawmakers are currently grappling with a number of controversial issues, from a proposed ballot issue to ban property taxes in Ohio to altering the state’s new recreational marijuana law.

But, he added, “none of that really rises to the controversial level of choosing a state fish.”

Moving his tongue out of his cheek, Callender said legislation such as the walleye bill gives lawmakers a chance to be non-partisan and create some camaraderie among them.

“It’s a chance to pull folks together, to have a light-hearted debate without the high stakes that the other issues we deal with, and (have) the joviality and a chance to break bread in a joking way with our colleagues on both sides of the aisle.”

School groups can also learn about civics and how state government works by tracking the bill as it moves through the legislative process and holding their classroom debates on which fish should become Ohio’s state fish, Callender said.

So does that mean that in another 25 years, the halls of the Ohio Statehouse will still ring with debate over an official Ohio state fish?

“No,” Callender replied smoothly. “I think that between now and then the perch’s superiority will become more apparent and will win.”