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A fisherman brings his catch ashore at Orleans Park in Perrysburg.
[Photo Credit: The Blade]

Still Not O-fish-al: The Walleye Bill Is the One That Got Away.....AGAIN



JIM PROVANCE
jprovance@theblade.com

JAN 2, 2025

COLUMBUS — State lawmakers have managed to deal with heavily controversial issues before.

But after two decades one issue remains as slippery as ever — naming the walleye as state fish.

For a moment, another effort to give the honor to the walleye — the pride of Lake Erie's sport-fishing industry — was proceeding swimmingly, clearing the House of Representatives as a stand-alone House Bill 599 by a vote of 94-4 with all of northwest Ohio's delegation hooked.

To increase its chances of becoming law, the House later slipped it into a separate measure, Senate Bill 62, that was already further upstream in the legislative process.

While neither bill landed on Gov. Mike DeWine's desk, the issue proved to be fodder for plenty of groan-worthy puns.

"The idea for this bill *spawned* from a resident who emailed me a few weeks ago. I told him to give me a few days *walleye think it over*," Rep. Sean Brennan (D., Parma) told a House committee. He sponsored the bill with Rep. D.J. Swearingen (R., Huron).

"Although there are some really bad jokes in this speech, I'm really serious about this ...," Mr. Brennan said. "It's time that we did this. To consider naming any other fish would really be a red herring."

The walleye is credited with bringing about \$1 billion in sport-fishing business to the state annually, helping to employ some 950 fishing charter guides

Lawmakers have been engaged in this fight for about two decades with the walleye getting competition over the years from the likes of the smallmouth bass and perch.

Rep. Jamie Callender (R., Concord), firmly in the perch column, was among just four no votes on the original House bill. He made it clear he wanted to see the bill netted before it could get the governor's signature.

"Perch are more plentiful," he said. "Perch are healthier. Perch tastes better. We should all advocate for perch. This is not a new debate. We fought about it before, and we were able to block it."

He also noted that the blue gill is present in all of Ohio's 88 counties.

Mr. Callender blamed the bill's progress this time, at least in the House, on term limits, leading to shorter political memories. Lawmakers had to be reminded, Mr. Callender said.

"The walleye lobbyists just played dirty, kind of like the fish ...," Mr. Callender said. "Something smells fishy in this."

S.B. 62, to which the walleye language was later added, was otherwise uncontroversial, stuffed with many popular official designations for specific days, weeks, and months in honor of specific persons, disease awareness, and causes.

Ultimately, many of those ended up being slipped into other bills when S.B. 62 stalled upon its return to the Senate.

Ohio has made plenty of decisions like this before. The cardinal is Ohio's official state bird. The whitetail deer is the official mammal. The ladybug and the black racer are the official insect and reptile, respectively.

When there was a fight for the title of state amphibian between the spotted salamander and the American bullfrog, lawmakers split the difference by naming the former the official amphibian and the latter the official frog.

The state has an official fruit, wildflower, beverage, song, rock song, and many others. In some cases, the campaigns for these designations started as classroom projects to teach about the democratic process.

So why have lawmakers been unable to hook the olive and gold-colored *Sander vitreus* with those large pearlescent eyes and white belly?

