

NOMINATION: Sport Fish Restoration Awards

CATEGORY: Recruitment, Retention, Reactivation (R3) and/or Angler Education

AGENCY SUBMITTING: Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife

Submitted by: Scott Hale, Executive Administrator, Fish Management and Research

Project Title: Erie PrOH Lake Erie Fishing Guide Certification Program

Date: August 1, 2024

Need: The number of fishing guides licensed on Lake Erie has steadily grown during the past 20 years in response to the unprecedented quality of the walleye fishery, with a population bolstered by above average hatches during seven of the past 10 years. Guides hosting parties of anglers provide an opportunity to promote resource stewardship and their industry through informed outreach and a means to recruit, retain, and reactivate anglers. However, to most effectively accomplish these goals, guides must be well informed about the lake and our fisheries and recognized as such. This is why the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife (ODNR), Ohio Sea Grant (OSG), and Shores and Islands Ohio (SIO) worked cooperatively to develop and launch the “Erie PrOH” Fishing Guide Certification Program.

Guided trips are an important component of Lake Erie fisheries. Lake Erie provides a vital multi-species fishery in Ohio with an estimated \$1 B in annual economic output. Approximately 400,000 anglers fish Lake Erie each year, with 59% of residents including it among the waters they fish and non-residents representing 25% of trips recorded during creel surveys. Currently, the industry of 950 charter boat captains includes mostly “6-pack” operations (i.e., 6 anglers per party), some smaller vessels hosting parties of 2 to 3 anglers, and a 10-15 vessel fleet of large head boats that support parties of 10-45 anglers.

In Ohio, only 8% of anglers licensed during a 5-year period buy a license every year, with 51% buying a license only once during this period. More than 2 million anglers engage in fishing through a license purchase during a 5-year period, but recruitment and retention remain low among Ohio’s population of nearly 12 million. Informed anglers supported in a high-quality fishing experience can increase public appreciation of Lake Erie, the value of its fisheries, and boost fishing participation. ***The Erie PrOH Guide Certification provides an unmet need to build capacity for outreach among licensed fishing guides on Lake Erie and represents a novel approach for accomplishing these goals.***

Objectives:

1. Work with the fishing guide industry to develop a voluntary, online, curriculum-based guide certification program to promote the industry, sport fishing, and resource stewardship by 2023.
2. Promote and monitor program success on an annual basis.
3. Annually update content as needed.

Approach: On September 21, 2020, representatives from ODNR, OSG, and SIO met to explore development of a voluntary Lake Erie fishing guide certification program. This process included launching a survey of licensed fishing guides during March 2021 to determine interest in a certification program and attributes of a program that may provide the greatest benefits. Following overall positive responses, planning began which involved forming an advisory committee of industry representatives from the west and central basins of Lake Erie and a focus group for development of a meaningful certification program. The steering committee then began routine monthly, then quarterly, meetings to frame the educational content (i.e., curriculum), address needs and logistics, assign responsibilities, and proceed with routine

status checks on progress. The next steps were producing educational modules, a companion hard copy binder of these materials, a name and logo for branding, and boat decals for posting on guide vessels.

Online, self-paced learning modules were developed through The Ohio State University “Scarlet Campus” using expertise from partner agencies. Modules included video content and knowledge checks to facilitate learning for the following topics: 1) best practices for harvesting and releasing fish; 2) fish ecology; 3) aquatic invasive species; 4) nutrient loading, algal blooms, and the “dead zone”; 5) the fisheries management process; 6) angler engagement with the fisheries management process; 7) boating safety; and 8) promoting fisheries. Testing of content, editing, and finalizing materials followed, with a certification program launched on August 1, 2023.

Details and application at: [Erie PrOH Guide Certification Program | Ohio Sea Grant \(osu.edu\)](https://osu.edu/erie-prOH-guide-certification-program) .

Results: To date, 77 licensed guides have been certified since the program was launched one year ago. We consider this first-year participation to be exceptional given the launch date and anticipate interest to continue to build. Program promotion continues via e-mail and upcoming in-person events.

Benefits: Erie PrOH certified guides will: 1) have detailed knowledge about topics and issues that affect Lake Erie; 2) act as responsible stewards of Lake Erie; 3) help others understand the importance of enjoying and protecting Lake Erie; 4) have access to curated resources provided by Lake Erie-focused professionals that will help communicate science to clients; 5) be designated, recognized, and promoted as “Erie PrOH Certified” on websites hosted by ODNR and OSG; 6) receive a vessel sticker acknowledging the certification; and 7) hold the certification for five years.

Certified fishing guides become recognized ambassadors of stewardship for the Ohio Lake Erie fishery. The Erie PrOH logo identifies business operators who appreciate, understand, and promote sustainable angling in Ohio.

Program cost has largely been attributed to staff time, module development, and production of hard-copy binders and boat stickers. Application cost to guides is \$75, with this cost reduced to \$50 for new applicants. All funds collected are used for program administration.

We anticipate a growing impact of the certification program as the number of certified guides increases through additional promotion and awareness of its benefits. Given the quality of the Lake Erie walleye fishery we anticipate a continued increase in licensed guides and charter boat effort. Clients of guided fishing trips in Lake Erie are a diverse group. Some receive an introduction to fishing, some gain an entry level experience to fishing Lake Erie or don’t have the knowledge or equipment to fish Lake Erie, and others simply want to spend a day on the water with family and friends. During 2023, guided clients fished an estimated 378,312 hours. Regardless of their background and familiarity with fishing, clients onboard these vessels will benefit from the experiences and knowledge of a certified guide. Promoting experiences through knowledgeable guides will help build and preserve a strong future for Ohio fisheries participation in Lake Erie, and perhaps beyond.

Evaluation: An online survey of all licensed guides is planned for late fall 2024 and communication will continue with the advisory committee and focus group.

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