

No.

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**In the Supreme Court of the United States**

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MIKE YODER, DRONE DEER RECOVERY LLC, AND  
JEREMY FUNKE,

*Petitioners,*

*v.*

SCOTT BOWEN, IN HIS OFFICIAL CAPACITY AS DIRECTOR  
OF THE MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL  
RESOURCES,

*Respondent.*

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*On Petition for a Writ of Certiorari  
to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit*

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**PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI**

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## QUESTION PRESENTED

Petitioner Mike Yoder and his company, Drone Deer Recovery LLC, use drones to locate downed game and to generate and transmit factual location information to hunters, including Petitioner Jeremy Funke. Michigan criminalizes that speech-producing activity and the receipt of that information, even though the state permits drones to be used for other expressive purposes, such as photographing wildlife and landscapes.

The Fourth and Ninth Circuits hold that the First Amendment protects the means of acquiring and creating information necessary to produce speech, including non-political speech. *Garcia v. Cnty. of Alameda*, 150 F.4th 1224, 1231 (9th Cir. 2025) and *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Inc. v. N.C. Farm Bureau Fed'n, Inc.*, 60 F.4th 815, 828 (4th Cir. 2023) (*PETA*). The Sixth Circuit adopted a contrary rule, holding that Yoder's drone-based information-gathering is unprotected because it does not produce "political" speech. As Judge Bush explained in his separate statement, a political/non-political distinction conflicts with those sister circuits and with this Court's recognition that the First Amendment protects the creation of factual information, including information "devoid of advocacy [or] political relevance." *Sorrell v. IMS Health Inc.*, 564 U.S. 552, 570 (2011).

The question presented is:

Whether the First Amendment protects the means of acquiring or creating speech when the speech is non-political.

**PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDING AND  
RULE 29.6 STATEMENT**

Petitioners were plaintiffs in the district court. They are Mike Yoder, Drone Deer Recovery LLC, and Jeremy Funke.

Respondent is Scott Bowen,<sup>1</sup> in his official capacity as Director of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Mr. Bowen was the defendant in district court.

Mr. Yoder and Mr. Funke are natural persons. Petitioner Drone Deer Recovery LLC is a limited liability company and the business name of HLE Drones LLC. Its parent corporation is Inspire Drone Technologies and no publicly held corporation holds any stock in it.

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<sup>1</sup> The original defendant was Shannon Lott, former Acting Director of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, who has since been substituted.

## STATEMENT OF RELATED CASES

These proceedings are directly related to the above-captioned case under Rule 14.1(b)(iii):

- *Yoder et al. v. Bowen*, No. 1:23-cv-00796-PLM-SJB, W. D. Mich (June 18, 2024) (granting defendant's motion to dismiss)
- *Yoder et al. v. Bowen*, No. 24-1593, 6th Cir. (July 31, 2025) (affirming the grant of the motion to dismiss)
- *Yoder et al. v. Bowen*, No. 24-1593, 6th Cir. (October 3, 2025) (denying petition for rehearing *en banc*)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Petition for a Writ of Certiorari .....	1
Opinions Below .....	1
Jurisdiction .....	1
Constitutional and Statutory Provisions Involved .....	1
Introduction .....	2
Statement of the Case .....	4
I. Mike Yoder, Drone Deer Recovery, and His Client, Jeremy Funke .....	4
II. Michigan’s Ban on the Use Of Drones for Hunting Prevents Yoder’s Location Services.....	6
III. Proceedings Below .....	7
Reasons for Granting the Petition .....	9
I. The Courts of Appeals Are Divided Over Whether the First Amendment Protects Non-Political Speech Inputs .....	9
II. The Sixth Circuit’s Political/Non-Political Distinction Conflicts with This Court’s First Amendment Precedents Protecting Speech Creation .....	11
III. The Sixth Circuit’s Rule Threatens Widespread Suppression of Speech at the Point of Creation .....	14
Conclusion.....	16

## APPENDIX

Opinion of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, dated July 31, 2025.....	1a
---	----

Order Resolving Motion to Dismiss, U.S. District Court for the Western District of Michigan, dated June 18, 2024.....	36a
Order of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, Denying Petition for Rehearing En Banc, with Statement, dated Oct. 3, 2025 .....	47a
Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40104.....	59a
Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c .....	60a
Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40118.....	61a
First Amended Complaint, dated Feb. 2, 2024.....	67a

## TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

	Page(s)
<b>Cases</b>	
<i>Am. C. Liberties Union of Ill. v. Alvarez</i> , 679 F.3d 583 (7th Cir. 2012) .....	12
<i>Brown v. Ent. Merchs. Ass’n</i> , 564 U.S. 786 (2011) .....	12
<i>Citizens United v. Fed. Election Comm’n</i> , 558 U.S. 310 (2010) .....	12
<i>City of Ladue v. Gilleo</i> , 512 U.S. 43 (1994) .....	15
<i>Fields v. City of Philadelphia</i> , 862 F.3d 353 (3d Cir. 2017).....	10, 12
<i>Garcia v. Cnty. of Alameda</i> , 150 F. 4th 1224 (9th Cir. 2025).....	3, 10
<i>People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Inc. v. N.C. Farm Bureau Fed’n, Inc.</i> , 60 F.4th 815 (4th Cir. 2023).....	3, 10
<i>Reed v. Town of Gilbert</i> , 576 U.S. 155 (2015) .....	13
<i>Sorrell v. IMS Health Inc.</i> , 564 U.S. 552 (2011) .....	2, 11
<i>Turner v. Lieutenant Driver</i> , 848 F.3d 678 (5th Cir. 2017) .....	11, 13
<i>W. Watersheds Project v. Michael</i> , 869 F.3d 1189 (10th Cir. 2017) .....	11, 13
<i>Yoder v. Bowen</i> , 146 F.4th 516 (6th Cir. 2025).....	1

*Yoder v. Bowen*,  
154 F.4th 454 (6th Cir. 2025)..... 1

*Yoder v. Bowen*,  
No. 1:23-cv-796, 2024 WL 6304957  
(W.D. Mich. June 18, 2024)..... 1

### **Statutes**

28 U.S.C. § 1254(1) ..... 1

Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40104..... 6

Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c ..... 6

### **Constitutional Provision**

U.S. Const. amend. I..... 1

### **Rules of Court**

Fed. R. of Civ. P. 12(b)(1)..... 7

Fed. R. of Civ. P. 12(b)(6)..... 7

### **Other Authorities**

Mohsan, Syed Agha Hassnain, et al.,  
*Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs):  
Practical Aspects, Applications, Open  
Challenges, Security Issues, and Future  
Trends*, 16 *Intelligent Service Robotics*  
109 (2023), available at  
<https://tinyurl.com/dukjbwrj> ..... 14

## **PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI**

Mike Yoder, Drone Deer Recovery LLC, and Jeremy Funke petition for a writ of certiorari to review the judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit.

### **OPINIONS BELOW**

The decision of the Sixth Circuit is available at 146 F.4th 516 and reprinted at App. 1a. The Sixth Circuit's denial of *en banc* review is available at 154 F.4th 454 and reprinted at App. 47a.

The decision of the United States District Court for the Western District of Michigan is not reported but it is available at 2024 WL 6304957 and reprinted at App. 36a.

### **JURISDICTION**

The final decision of the Sixth Circuit sought to be reviewed was issued on July 31, 2025. App. 1a. Denial of *en banc* review was issued on October 3, 2025. App. 47a. On December 23, 2025, Justice Kavanaugh granted a motion to extend the deadline to file a petition for writ of certiorari to February 2, 2026. This Court has jurisdiction under 28 U.S.C. § 1254(1).

### **CONSTITUTIONAL AND STATUTORY PROVISIONS INVOLVED**

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution provides: “Congress shall make no law. . . abridging the freedom of speech.”

Relevant portions of the Michigan Compiled Laws appear at App. 59a-66a.

## INTRODUCTION

This case presents an important and recurring First Amendment question about the protection afforded to speech creation: when a state restricts the means of acquiring or generating factual information, does the First Amendment treat that as a burden on speech—regardless of whether the resulting speech is “political”?

This Court’s cases recognize that “the creation and dissemination of information are speech within the meaning of the First Amendment,” including “dry information, devoid of advocacy, political relevance or artistic expression.” *Sorrell v. IMS Health Inc.*, 564 U.S. 552, 570 (2011). But the Court has not had occasion to decide whether, or when, a government may categorically exclude the creation of non-political factual information from First Amendment scrutiny by labeling it outside the sphere of protected “speech inputs.” The courts of appeals have now divided on that question—with the Sixth Circuit adopting a political/non-political line that other circuits have not drawn.

The Sixth Circuit adopted the political/non-political line and used it to deny First Amendment protection to Petitioners’ drone-enabled information gathering. It held that the First Amendment protects speech inputs only when they generate core political speech, and that Petitioners’ activity falls outside the Amendment’s reach because it produces non-political location data. App. 19a-20a. Under that rule, a state may prohibit the tools used to acquire or generate factual information—without triggering heightened scrutiny—so long as the resulting speech lacks political content.

Other circuits have refrained from setting that limitation. The Fourth Circuit has held that restrictions on acquiring and recording non-political information burden speech and implicate the First Amendment. *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Inc. v. N.C. Farm Bureau Fed'n, Inc.*, 60 F.4th 815, 828-29 (4th Cir. 2023). The Ninth Circuit has likewise held that observation and recording are protected predicates of speech creation, even when the resulting speech concerns non-political subjects. *Garcia v. Cnty. of Alameda*, 150 F. 4th 1224, 1230-31 (9th Cir. 2025). Those courts have declined to condition constitutional protection on the political character of the speech ultimately produced.

The Sixth Circuit's rule rests on a distinction this Court has never endorsed. *Sorrell* recognized that factual information receives First Amendment protection regardless of its political content, but it did not address whether governments may categorically exclude the creation of such information from protection by regulating the tools that produce it. The Sixth Circuit answered that open question by imposing a political-content requirement that other courts have refused to adopt.

That disagreement has significant practical consequences. Modern technologies—drones, cameras, and recording devices—are widely used to acquire and transmit factual information in non-political settings. A rule that allows states to ban those tools whenever the resulting speech is deemed non-political authorizes suppression at the point of creation and gives governments broad discretion to restrict speech before it exists.

The danger is not confined to this case. Information that begins as non-political fact often becomes the foundation for later public debate, advocacy, or reform. A political/non-political dividing line permits governments to suppress speech inputs at the moment of acquisition, even though the value of the information may emerge only after it is created.

This Court should grant certiorari to resolve the division among the courts of appeals and clarify whether the First Amendment permits governments to evade strict scrutiny by restricting the means of acquiring or creating non-political speech.

## STATEMENT OF THE CASE

### I. **Mike Yoder, Drone Deer Recovery, and His Client, Jeremy Funke**

Mike Yoder is the owner of Drone Deer Recovery LLC (DDR), a business he started in Ohio that uses drone technology to assist hunters in locating deer and other game after the game has been shot. App. 67a, 69a, ¶¶ 1, 10.

Mr. Yoder's services are valuable because game commonly run off after being shot and then perish at a distance from where they were struck. App. 71a ¶ 18. When this happens, hunters can hire a drone pilot in their area through DDR's website to locate their kill. *Id.* ¶ 23.

DDR provides this service only after the hunter has shot the animal and stowed his or her weapons. *Ibid.* DDR never pilots drones to pursue live animals for hunters to kill. App. 72a ¶ 29.

After the hunter stows his or her weapons, a DDR pilot flies a drone approximately 400 feet above the ground and scans the area for heat signatures using

the drone's thermal imaging technology. App. 71a-72a ¶¶ 23-26. This technology allows drone operators to conduct searches in low-light conditions. App. 72a-73a ¶¶ 26, 30.

Once the drone detects a heat signature resembling the hunter's animal, the pilot activates the drone's 200X zoom camera and lights to view the animal and confirm that it is the one that the hunter shot. App. 72a ¶ 27. If the pilot determines that it is the correct animal and the animal is deceased or will be deceased by the following morning, the pilot directs the drone to relay the animal's coordinates to Global Positioning System satellites, creating a location pin. App. 72a ¶¶ 27-28. The pilot then transmits this location pin to the hunter using Google Maps or another mapping application. App. 72a ¶ 29. The location pin contains the location coordinates of the downed game. *Id.* ¶ 28.

Michigan hunters like Petitioner Jeremy Funke would like to use DDR's services. App. 69a ¶¶ 8, 11. He needs the location information DDR provides because Michigan law requires hunters to make reasonable efforts to retrieve their game. App. 71a ¶ 20. Mr. Yoder's services are especially useful in Michigan's dense landscapes, where felled game can remain hidden. *Id.* ¶ 18. Retrieving downed game also prevents waste. *Id.* ¶ 20.

Drones are less intrusive to the surrounding environment and more effective at locating downed game than other methods like trail cameras or tracking dogs. *Id.* ¶ 22. DDR's drones mostly operate at night, approximately 400 feet above ground, and produce ambient, nondescript noise. App. 72a, 73a ¶¶ 26, 30.

## II. Michigan's Ban on the Use of Drones for Hunting Prevents Yoder's Location Services

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) prohibits DDR from communicating the location of downed game by applying a statutory prohibition on hunting with drones to DDR's drone-assisted location services. App. 73a ¶ 31.

Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c (Drone Statute) provides, “[a]n individual shall not take game or fish using an unmanned vehicle or unmanned device that uses aerodynamic forces to achieve flight.” App. 60a, 73a ¶ 34.

Michigan law defines “taking game” to mean “to hunt with any weapon, dog, raptor, or other wild or domestic animal trained for that purpose; kill; chase; follow; harass; harm; pursue; shoot; rob; trap; capture; or collect animals, or to attempt to engage in such an activity.” Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40104; App. 59a, 73a-74a ¶ 35.

MDNR interprets “use” under the Drone Statute to include “locate.” App. 74a ¶ 37. Under that interpretation, when a drone locates an animal's carcass after it has been downed by a hunter, the drone is being “used” to “collect” that animal, allegedly in violation of the Drone Statute. *Ibid.*

In 2023, in response to inquiries about whether drones may be used to locate downed game, MDNR officials stated that using drones for that purpose in Michigan is illegal under the Drone Statute. App. 73a ¶¶ 31-33.

Nothing in the text of the Drone Statute prohibits the general operation of drones or the gathering and transmission of other types of information. App. 59a, 60a, 73a-74a ¶¶ 34-35. Indeed, MDNR itself uses

drones for other purposes, including assessing forest health. App. 18a, 54a.

Violations of the Drone Statute are misdemeanors punishable by imprisonment or a fine, depending on the type of animal involved. App. 61a, 74a ¶ 36. As a result, Mr. Yoder and DDR will not operate in Michigan, and Mr. Funke will not seek their services, out of fear of prosecution. App. 69a, 70a-71a ¶¶ 11, 17.

### **III. Proceedings Below**

Mr. Yoder, Drone Deer Recovery LLC, and Mr. Funke brought this civil rights lawsuit in the United States District Court for the Western District of Michigan, challenging Michigan's Drone Statute as applied to DDR's drone-assisted location services. App. 67a-77a. The complaint alleges that the statutory ban on using drones to locate downed game violates Petitioners' First Amendment rights to collect, create, transmit, and receive factual location information. App. 74a-76a ¶¶ 38-51. Petitioners seek declaratory and injunctive relief barring MDNR from enforcing the Drone Statute against their activities. App. 76a-77a.

Respondents moved to dismiss under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(1) and 12(b)(6), arguing that Petitioners lacked standing and that they failed to state a First Amendment claim.<sup>1</sup> App. 36a, 39a-45a. The district court granted the motion, holding that Petitioners lacked standing because their injury was not redressable and that the Drone Statute regulates conduct rather than speech. *Ibid.* The district court

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<sup>1</sup> Respondents also sought dismissal based on MDNR's immunity under the Eleventh Amendment, but the district court did not address this argument.

further held that drones are not protected speech inputs. *Id.*

On appeal, a Sixth Circuit panel reversed the standing ruling but affirmed dismissal for failure to state a claim. App. 1a. The panel held that Petitioners had standing but declined to apply First Amendment strict scrutiny, concluding that the Drone Statute is a content-neutral restriction despite permitting the acquisition and transmission of other information, drones are not speech inputs, and flying a drone is not inherently expressive conduct, thereby rejecting each separately asserted basis for such review. App. 17a-22a.

With respect to speech inputs, the panel distinguished Petitioners' use of drones from other protected inputs on the ground that the information they created—location data regarding downed game—is not political speech. App. 19a-20a. Because the drones did not generate political expression, the panel concluded that the drones are not speech inputs that the First Amendment protects, so prohibiting them did not warrant heightened strict scrutiny. *Ibid.*

Petitioners sought rehearing *en banc*, which the Sixth Circuit denied. App. 48a. Judge Bush issued a separate statement expressing concern with the panel's speech-inputs analysis. App. 49a-50a. He explained that the panel's reasoning conflicted with *Sorrell*, which recognizes First Amendment protection for speech creation and for factual information regardless of political content. App. 53a. Judge Bush further questioned the panel's political/non-political distinction, observing that "the alleged wrong from prohibiting drone usage does not depend on whether the speech is political" and that a ban on a speech

input can violate the First Amendment by “effectively abolish[ing] the speech altogether.” App. 52a. He closed by urging this Court to provide guidance on the scope of the speech-inputs doctrine. App. 58a.

## **REASONS FOR GRANTING THE PETITION**

Review is warranted because the decision below adopts a novel limitation on First Amendment protection for speech creation, deepens a direct conflict among the courts of appeals, and presents a clean vehicle for resolving an important and recurring constitutional question. The Sixth Circuit’s political/non-political distinction has no footing in this Court’s precedents and invites widespread suppression of factual speech at the point of creation.

### **I. The Courts of Appeals Are Divided Over Whether the First Amendment Protects Non-Political Speech Inputs**

The decision below deepens a square conflict among the courts of appeals over whether the First Amendment protects the means of acquiring or creating non-political speech. The Sixth Circuit has held that speech inputs receive constitutional protection only when they generate “core political speech.” Other circuits have rejected that limitation and have held that restrictions on acquiring or creating factual information implicate the First Amendment regardless of the political character of the resulting speech.

The Sixth Circuit adopted a categorical political/non-political distinction. It concluded that Petitioners’ drones are not protected speech inputs because they generate non-political location

information, and that regulations restricting their use therefore do not warrant heightened scrutiny. App. 19a-20a. Under that rule, a state may prohibit the tools used to gather factual information—without triggering strict scrutiny—so long as the information lacks political content.

Other circuits have declined to impose that limitation. The Fourth Circuit has held that laws restricting the acquisition and recording of non-political information burden speech and implicate the First Amendment. *PETA*, 60 F.4th at 828-29. There, the court rejected the argument that restrictions on recording could escape First Amendment scrutiny simply because the resulting speech was not political. *Ibid.*

The Ninth Circuit has taken the same approach. It has held that observation and recording are protected predicates of speech creation, even when the resulting speech concerned non-political subjects. *Garcia*, 150 F.4th at 1231. The court emphasized that the First Amendment protects the process of creating speech and that governments may not evade scrutiny by regulating a predicate of speech rather than its final expression. *Ibid.*

The Sixth Circuit stands alone in conditioning First Amendment protection for speech inputs on the political character of the speech they generate. That division warrants this Court's review. The consensus among the sister circuits rejects conditioning the protection of speech inputs on whether they create political speech, placing the Sixth Circuit at odds with the prevailing law. *See Fields v. City of Philadelphia*, 862 F.3d 353, 358-60 (3d Cir. 2017) (“We need not, however, address at length the limits of this

constitutional right [to record].”); *Turner v. Lieutenant Driver*, 848 F.3d 678, 689 (5th Cir. 2017) (The First Amendment protects “the broader right to film.”); *W. Watersheds Project v. Michael*, 869 F.3d 1189, 1197 (10th Cir. 2017) (“The challenged statutes apply specifically to the creation of speech, and thus we conclude they are subject to the First Amendment.”).

Although the purpose of the speech at issue in these cases varies, regulations on their *creation* are sufficient to trigger First Amendment protection, regardless of whether the speech is political.

## **II. The Sixth Circuit’s Political/Non-Political Distinction Conflicts with This Court’s First Amendment Precedents Protecting Speech Creation**

The Sixth Circuit’s political/non-political distinction is irreconcilable with this Court’s First Amendment jurisprudence, which has repeatedly recognized that the Constitution protects the creation of speech and the acquisition of factual information, regardless of whether the resulting speech is political.

This Court has made clear that “the creation and dissemination of information are speech within the meaning of the First Amendment,” and that protection extends to “even dry information, devoid of advocacy, political relevance, or artistic expression.” *Sorrell*, 564 U.S. at 570. Although *Sorrell* did not delineate the precise contours of protection for every form of speech creation, it rejected the premise that factual or non-political information occupies a lesser constitutional status. *Id.* at 570-71. Nothing in *Sorrell* suggests that the tools used to create such information may be categorically excluded from First Amendment

scrutiny based on the subject matter of the speech they generate.

This Court's broader precedents likewise confirm that the First Amendment protects speech at multiple stages of the communicative process. "Laws enacted to control or suppress speech may operate at different points in the speech process," and restrictions on speech creation are constitutionally significant even when they do not directly regulate the final message. *Citizens United v. Fed. Election Comm'n*, 558 U.S. 310, 336 (2010); see also *Brown v. Ent. Merchs. Ass'n*, 564 U.S. 786, 793 n.1 (2011) ("Whether government regulation applies to creating, distributing, or consuming speech makes no difference.").

Consistent with that understanding, the courts of appeals—until the decision below—have recognized that the First Amendment protects the acquisition and creation of factual information, even when the speech produced is non-political. The Third Circuit has held that the First Amendment safeguards the right to record police activity in public, emphasizing that the act of recording itself is protected because it is a necessary predicate to accessing information. *Fields*, 862 F.3d at 358-60. The Seventh Circuit reached the same conclusion in invalidating a ban on audio recording, explaining that restrictions on recording implicate the First Amendment by targeting the creation of information. *Am. C. Liberties Union of Ill. v. Alvarez*, 679 F.3d 583, 600 (7th Cir. 2012) ("Any way you look at it, the eavesdropping statute burdens speech and press rights and is subject to heightened First Amendment scrutiny.").

The Fifth and Tenth Circuits have similarly rejected efforts to sever speech creation from First

Amendment protection. The Fifth Circuit has recognized a “broader right to film” as part of the First Amendment’s protection for newsgathering and information creation. *Turner*, 848 F.3d at 689. And the Tenth Circuit has held that statutes regulating the “creation of speech” are subject to First Amendment scrutiny, even when the information gathered is factual and non-political. *W. Watersheds Project*, 869 F.3d at 1196-97.

The Sixth Circuit’s rule departs from this settled understanding by making First Amendment protection turn on whether the speech created is political. That distinction finds no support in this Court’s cases. On the contrary, this Court has repeatedly warned against content-based distinctions that depend on the subject matter or purpose of speech. *Reed v. Town of Gilbert*, 576 U.S. 155, 163-65 (2015). A rule that requires courts to examine whether speech inputs generate “political” or “non-political” speech necessarily depends on the content and function of the speech being produced—and therefore triggers the very scrutiny the Sixth Circuit sought to avoid.

Nor is the Sixth Circuit’s limitation administrable. Speech inputs are not inherently political or non-political. A camera, recorder, or drone may be used to create scenic footage, commercial data, academic research, or documentation later used in public debate. Conditioning constitutional protection on the perceived political value of the resulting speech invites arbitrary enforcement and permits governments to suppress speech at the point of creation based on its anticipated use.

Because the Sixth Circuit’s political/non-political distinction conflicts with this Court’s precedents protecting speech creation and factual information, and because it diverges from the approach taken by every other circuit to consider the issue, this Court’s review is warranted.

### **III. The Sixth Circuit’s Rule Threatens Widespread Suppression of Speech at the Point of Creation**

The Sixth Circuit’s political/non-political distinction has consequences far beyond this case. By allowing governments to prohibit speech inputs whenever the resulting speech is deemed non-political, the decision below authorizes suppression of speech at the moment of creation—before its value, relevance, or future use can be known.

Modern speech depends on tools that acquire, record, and transmit factual information. Drones, cameras, audio recorders, and similar technologies are ubiquitous means of creating speech in journalism, academia, commerce, and everyday life. A rule that permits states to ban those tools based on the perceived subject matter of the information they generate grants governments sweeping discretion to suppress facts before they enter the marketplace of ideas.

Drones alone are widely used in a number of industries to acquire and transmit information.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Syed Agha Hassnain Mohsan et al., *Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs): Practical Aspects, Applications, Open Challenges, Security Issues, and Future Trends*, 16 *Intelligent Service Robotics* 109, 110-11 (2023), available at <https://tinyurl.com/dukjbwrj>.

Readily permitting drone-targeted regulations would significantly hinder transmission of a large swath of non-political information.

That danger is especially acute because speech does not come pre-labeled as “political” or “non-political.” Information that begins as neutral fact often becomes the foundation for later advocacy, public debate, or reform. As Judge Bush explained in his separate statement below, “the alleged wrong from prohibiting drone usage does not depend on whether the speech is political,” because “the constitutional violation from banning a speech input arises when the restriction effectively abolishes the speech altogether.” App. 52a. A rule that permits bans at the point of acquisition ignores the reality that the value of speech frequently emerges only after it is created.

This Court has long recognized that it is “readily apparent” how laws that foreclose an “entire medium of expression” are particularly dangerous to the freedom of speech, even when they do not target a particular viewpoint. *City of Ladue v. Gilleo*, 512 U.S. 43, 55 (1994). By allowing states to prohibit speech-creating tools whenever they generate non-political information, the Sixth Circuit’s rule permits precisely that form of overbroad suppression.

The chilling effect is neither speculative nor limited. If non-political speech inputs fall outside the First Amendment’s protection, governments may regulate or ban recording technologies, data-gathering tools, or observation methods whenever the information collected is deemed insufficiently expressive. Judge Bush warned that such a rule “could be employed to diminish academic freedom,” or “effectively ban” entire forms of journalism that

involve recording or documenting non-political subjects. App. 56a-57a. That uncertainty leaves speakers unable to know in advance whether the tools they rely on to gather information are constitutionally protected—an uncertainty that itself deters speech.

This case presents a clean vehicle for resolving that issue. The Sixth Circuit squarely held that non-political speech inputs are categorically unprotected, creating a direct conflict with other courts of appeals and prompting a member of the court below to urge this Court's review. Clarification is necessary to prevent the erosion of First Amendment protection for speech at its source.

### CONCLUSION

The petition for a writ of certiorari should be granted.

Respectfully submitted,

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FEBRUARY 2026

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Opinion of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth  
Circuit, dated July 31, 2025 .....1a

Order Resolving Motion to Dismiss, U.S. District  
Court for the Western District of Michigan,  
dated June 18, 2024 .....36a

Order of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth  
Circuit, Denying Petition for Rehearing En Banc,  
with Statement, dated Oct. 3, 2025.....47a

Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40104 .....59a

Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c.....60a

Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40118 .....61a

First Amended Complaint, dated Feb. 2, 2024 .....67a

Appendix 1a

Case: 24-1593 Document: 27-2 Filed: 07/31/2025

RECOMMENDED FOR PUBLICATION  
Pursuant to Sixth Circuit I.O.P. 32.1(b)

**UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS  
FOR THE SIXTH CIRCUIT**

MIKE YODER; DRONE  
DEER RECOVERY LLC,  
identified on initiating  
documents as Drone  
Deer Recovery Media,  
Inc.; JEREMY FUNKE,  
*Plaintiffs-Appellants,*

No. 24-1593

v.

SCOTT BOWEN, in his  
official capacity as  
Director of the Michigan  
Department of Natural  
Resources, identified on  
initiating document as  
Shannon Lott,  
*Defendant-Appellee.*

Appeal from the United States District Court for the  
Western District of Michigan at Grand Rapids.  
No. 1:23-cv-00796—Paul Lewis Maloney, District  
Judge.

Argued: January 29, 2025

Decided and Filed: July 31, 2025

## Appendix 2a

Before: COLE, WHITE, and MATHIS, Circuit  
Judges.

\* \* \* \* \*

The court delivered a PER CURIAM opinion. MATHIS, J. (pp. 19-25), delivered a separate opinion concurring in the judgment.

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### OPINION

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PER CURIAM. Plaintiffs-Appellants Mike Yoder; Yoder's company, Drone Deer Recovery, LLC (DDR); and life-long hunter Jeremy Funke (collectively, Plaintiffs) appeal the district court's dismissal of their complaint challenging a Michigan law that bans the use of drones to hunt or collect downed game. Because we find that Plaintiffs have standing but fail to state a claim on which relief can be granted, we AFFIRM.

#### I. Background

##### A. Factual Background

After a hunter shoots a game animal, such as a deer, the animal often runs away and dies in another location. Tracking dogs and trail cameras are two ways of finding the animal. DDR offers a third option—one that it says is less environmentally intrusive and more effective than dogs or trail cameras. A hunter in an area where DDR does business can use DDR's website to connect with a nearby drone operator. The drone operator then searches for the downed animal's heat signature using the drone's infrared camera and thermal imaging technology. Upon finding a heat signature, the drone

### Appendix 3a

operator activates the drone's camera and search lights to identify the downed deer.

If the drone operator determines that the animal is dead or will die by the next morning, the operator creates a Global Positioning System (GPS) location pin for the animal's location and sends that information to the hunter. The hunter can then find the downed animal using Google Maps or a similar application.

Plaintiffs allege that a Michigan law prohibiting the use of drones to hunt or take downed game (the Drone Statute) prevents DDR from doing business in Michigan. *See* Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c(2) (2015). The Michigan State Legislature enacted the law to prevent the use of drones and unmanned submersibles—by either anti-hunting activists attempting to disrupt hunting or hunters seeking an unfair advantage—because such conduct “would violate fair-chase principles and take away from the spirit and tradition of ethical hunting and fishing.” R. 25-1, PID 123.

As relevant here, the Drone Statute proscribes “tak[ing] game or fish using an unmanned vehicle or unmanned device that uses aerodynamic forces to achieve flight.” Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c(2). The statute defines “take” as “to hunt with any weapon, dog, raptor, or other wild or domestic animal trained for that purpose; kill; chase; follow; harass; harm; pursue; shoot; rob; trap; capture; or collect animals, or to attempt to engage in such an activity.” *Id.* § 324.40104(1). “Game” is any animal from an enumerated list of 39 wild animals. *Id.* § 324.40103(1). Violating the Drone Statute is a misdemeanor

## Appendix 4a

punishable by fine of \$50-500 and/or up to ninety days' imprisonment. *Id.* § 324.40118.

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources (the MDNR) has regulatory authority over “managing animals” in Michigan, which includes determining “lawful methods of taking game.” Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40107(1). Accordingly, it is responsible for enforcing the Drone Statute. It has issued public guidance explaining that the Drone Statute prohibits individuals from using drones to locate or recover injured game, specifically stating that “[a]ttempting to locate and/or recover game, either dead or wounded, is an act which falls within the definition of ‘take.’” Mich. Dep’t of Nat. Res., *After the Harvest*, MICH. SMALL GAME HUNTING REGULS. SUMM. (2024), <https://perma.cc/WN87-9FRY> (the “Hunting Regulations Summary”). Plaintiffs also allege that the MDNR informed two persons who sent the MDNR inquiries about using drones to locate downed deer in Michigan that such drone use is illegal.

### **B. Procedural History**

Based on the facts described above, Plaintiffs sued the MDNR under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, alleging that the Drone Statute, as applied to them, violates their First Amendment right to create, disseminate, and receive location information for downed game. They sought both declaratory and injunctive relief, including a permanent injunction “restraining [the MDNR] . . . from enforcing [the Drone Statute] against Plaintiffs in a manner that prevents the creation, dissemination, and receipt of certain information.” R. 23, PID 93.

## Appendix 5a

The MDNR moved to dismiss under Federal Rules of Civil Procedure 12(b)(1) and 12(b)(6). It argued that the Drone Statute does not infringe on First Amendment-protected speech because the text of the statute prohibits only using a drone to locate a deer—something the MDNR argues is not speech—and does not prohibit telling another person a deer’s location, which would be speech. Accordingly, the MDNR contended that Plaintiffs had not shown a cognizable injury and, even if they had, they still lacked standing because the requested injunction would not allow DDR to operate in Michigan. It also argued that the Eleventh Amendment precluded Plaintiffs’ lawsuit.

The district court granted the MDNR’s motion, holding that Plaintiffs both lacked standing and failed to state a claim on which relief could be granted. It first “separated [Plaintiffs’ conduct] into two elements: flying a drone to track downed game (illegal and regulated) and relaying the location of the game to patron hunters (legal and unregulated).” R. 28, PID 170. It then determined that the Drone Statute does not prohibit Plaintiffs from sending or receiving location information, and that “[n]othing in the Drone Statute contemplates speech or its regulation.” *Id.* The court also concluded that Plaintiffs’ alleged injury was not redressable because the Drone Statute would still prohibit flying a drone to locate downed game even if the court granted Plaintiffs’ requested injunction, which would “enjoin ‘Defendant from enforcing Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c against Plaintiffs in a manner that prevents the creation, dissemination, and receipt of certain information.’” *Id.* (quoting R. 1, PID 9).

## Appendix 6a

The district court determined that Plaintiffs had not stated a claim for similar reasons. Because the court determined that using drones to track downed game and relaying location information to a hunter were separable, it examined only whether using a drone to search the wilderness for downed game constituted protected speech—a question it answered in the negative. Accordingly, it granted the MDNR’s motion to dismiss based on both Rule 12(b)(1) and Rule 12(b)(6).

This appeal followed.

### II. Standard of Review

We review the district court’s grant of a motion to dismiss for failure to state a claim de novo. *Booth Fam. Tr. v. Jeffries*, 640 F.3d 134, 139 (6th Cir. 2011). To survive a Rule 12(b)(6) motion to dismiss, a “complaint must present sufficient facts to ‘state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.’” *Robbins v. New Cingular Wireless PCS, LLC*, 854 F.3d 315, 319 (6th Cir. 2017) (quoting *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007)). In determining whether a complaint meets that standard, we must “construe the complaint in the light most favorable to the plaintiff, draw all reasonable inferences in its favor, and accept all well-pleaded allegations in the complaint as true.” *Keene Grp., Inc. v. City of Cincinnati*, 998 F.3d 306, 310 (6th Cir. 2021). But we may disregard “naked assertions devoid of further factual enhancement” and “formulaic recitation[s] of the elements of a cause of action.” *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (cleaned up).

We also review de novo dismissals for lack of subject-matter jurisdiction, including dismissals for

## Appendix 7a

lack of standing. *Phillips v. DeWine*, 841 F.3d 405, 413 (6th Cir. 2016). A challenge to the court’s subject-matter jurisdiction under Rule 12(b)(1) can be either facial or factual. *Ohio Nat’l Life Ins. Co. v. United States*, 922 F.2d 320, 325 (6th Cir. 1990). Because the MDNR questions the sufficiency of the pleadings and does not dispute jurisdictional facts, it presents a facial attack on subject-matter jurisdiction. See *Enriquez-Perdomo v. Newman*, 54 F.4th 855, 861 (6th Cir. 2022). We therefore accept the well-pleaded factual allegations as true and construe the Complaint in Plaintiffs’ favor. *Id.*

### III. Analysis

For the reasons discussed below, we find that Plaintiffs have standing. We nonetheless affirm the district court’s dismissal of their Complaint because Plaintiffs do not state a claim on which relief can be granted.

#### A. Standing

“Standing stems from the Constitution’s mandate that federal courts may decide only ‘Cases’ or ‘Controversies,’” *Vonderhaar v. Vill. of Evendale*, 906 F.3d 397, 400-01 (6th Cir. 2018) (citing U.S. Const. art. III, § 2, cl. 1), and is a prerequisite to federal jurisdiction, *Loren v. Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Mich.*, 505 F.3d 598, 607 (6th Cir. 2007). “The irreducible constitutional minimum of standing contains three elements.” *Lujan v. Defs. of Wildlife*, 504 U.S. 555, 560 (1992)).

First, Plaintiffs must have suffered an actual past injury, or will suffer imminent future injury, that is concrete and particularized. *Spokeo, Inc. v. Robins*,

## Appendix 8a

578 U.S. 330, 339 (2016). “Particularized” means that “the injury must affect the plaintiff in a personal and individual way.” *Lujan*, 504 U.S. at 560 n. 1. “[A] ‘generalized grievance,’ no matter how sincere, is insufficient . . . .” *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, 570 U.S. 693, 706 (2013).

Second, Plaintiffs’ injury must be “fairly traceable to” or causally connected to the challenged conduct, rather than “the result of the independent action of some third party not before the court.” *Lujan*, 504 U.S. at 560 (cleaned up). Third, a favorable ruling on the requested relief must be likely to redress Plaintiffs’ injury. *Id.* at 561.

### 1. Injury

In the pre-enforcement context, showing an imminent future injury requires plausibly alleging: (1) “an intention to engage in a course of conduct” that is (2) “arguably affected with a constitutional interest” but (3) is “proscribed by a statute,” and (4) that there is “a credible threat of prosecution” under that statute. *Susan B. Anthony List v. Driehaus*, 573 U.S. 149, 159 (2014). Plaintiffs have done so.

First, Plaintiffs have plausibly alleged an intention to bring DDR’s business model to Michigan. In addition to alleging that DDR does business in other states, they allege that they receive “frequent requests for deer recovery services in Michigan,” which they reject for “fear” that the MDNR will enforce the Drone Statute against them, but “are ready, willing, and able to operate in Michigan” absent a threat of enforcement. R. 23, PID 87. That is enough to plausibly allege an intention to do business in Michigan. *See Kiser v. Reitz*, 765 F.3d 601, 608 (6th

## Appendix 9a

Cir. 2014) (finding that the plaintiff had plausibly alleged an intent to advertise his general surgery services where he “alleged that he has advertised . . . services in the past and that he intends to do so in the future”).

Second, Plaintiffs’ proposed course of conduct is arguably affected with a constitutional interest. “[T]he creation and dissemination of information are speech within the meaning of the First Amendment.” *Sorrell v. IMS Health Inc.*, 564 U.S. 552, 570 (2011). Accordingly, everything from prescriber information, *id.* at 570-71, to credit reports, *Dun & Bradstreet, Inc. v. Greenmoss Builders, Inc.*, 472 U.S. 749, 753, 759-61 (1985), and information on beer can labels, *Rubin v. Coors Brewing Co.*, 514 U.S. 476, 481 (1995), may be speech for First Amendment purposes. And Plaintiffs’ use of drones—a novel medium—does not necessarily put their creation of information beyond the bounds of First Amendment protections. *See, e.g., Brown v. Ent. Merchs. Ass’n*, 564 U.S. 786, 790 (2011) (extending First Amendment protections to video games); *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson*, 343 U.S. 495, 501 (1952) (extending First Amendment protections to movies); *Nat’l Press Photographers Ass’n v. McCraw*, 90 F.4th 770, 783, 789-90 (5th Cir. 2024) (finding First Amendment interest in using a drone to take images while conducting aerial surveillance).

The MDNR makes three arguments to the contrary. It first argues that flying a drone is distinct from creating a location pin, and that the only allegedly protected activity is creating and sharing location pins, not operating a drone. But Plaintiffs specifically argue that the MDNR violated their First Amendment rights by preventing them from using

## Appendix 10a

drones to create and share location information, as opposed to flying drones for another purpose or creating location pins without using drones. Thus, for purposes of this specific as-applied challenge, we do not agree that flying drones is separable from creating and disseminating location information.

The MDNR also points out that the text of the Drone Statute itself prohibits conduct, not speech. Again, the case before us is an as-applied challenge. The question is whether the Drone Statute is unconstitutional as applied to Plaintiffs' intended conduct, not whether the Drone Statute is unconstitutional on its face. *Ross v. Duggan*, 402 F.3d 575, 582 n.3 (6th Cir. 2004). And, as discussed above, Plaintiffs have alleged that the MDNR's interpretation and proposed enforcement of the Drone Statute burdens their First Amendment right to create and share information.

Finally, the MDNR points out that Plaintiffs can create location information for downed game without violating the Drone Statute because they need not use drones. But the availability of other ways of creating and sharing location information does not negate Plaintiffs' First Amendment interest in using drones to do so. *See Meyer v. Grant*, 486 U.S. 414, 424 (1988) ("That appellees remain free to employ other means to disseminate their ideas does not take their speech through [their preferred means] outside the bounds of First Amendment protection.").

The Drone Statute also proscribes Plaintiffs' intended conduct—the third *Susan B. Anthony List* element. 573 U.S. at 159. "[A]t the pre-enforcement stage, [Plaintiffs] need not prove conclusively that [their] intended course of conduct violates the

## Appendix 11a

[statute] but only that it is *arguably* proscribed by the statute.” *Friends of George’s Inc., v. Mulroy*, 108 F.4th 431, 437 (6th Cir. 2024). Plaintiffs make that showing here. Again, the Drone Statute prohibits “tak[ing] game or fish using an unmanned vehicle or unmanned device that uses aerodynamic forces to achieve flight.” Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c(2). The MDNR’s own publicly issued guidance explains that using drones to locate dead or wounded game falls within the definition of “take.” Hunting Reguls. Summ. ¶ 1. And Plaintiffs cannot use drones to create location information for downed game without using drones to locate the animal. *See Brown v. Kemp*, 86 F.4th 745, 763 (7th Cir. 2023) (“A statutory prohibition on a particular medium inevitably affects expression by restricting communication within and through the medium.” (internal quotation marks and citation omitted)). The Drone Statute thus effectively prohibits Plaintiffs from creating location information using drones, even though the statutory text itself does not expressly prohibit creating location information. *Cf W. Watersheds Project v. Michael*, 869 F.3d 1189, 1195, 1197 (10th Cir. 2017) (holding that statutes that prohibited crossing private property to collect “resource data” such as photographs, notes, and audio recordings if the individual also recorded the geographic coordinates where the data was gathered implicated First Amendment interests).

With respect to the final *Susan B. Anthony List* element, Plaintiffs have shown a credible threat of prosecution. 573 U.S. at 159. We have previously found that plaintiffs show a credible threat of enforcement where they allege “a subjective chill *and* point to some combination” of the following four

## Appendix 12a

factors: (1) “a history of past enforcement”; (2) receipt of “enforcement warning letters . . . regarding their specific conduct”; (3) “an attribute of the challenged statute that makes enforcement easier or more likely, such as a provision allowing any member of the public to initiate an enforcement action”; and (4) whether the defendant has “disavow[ed] enforcement of the challenged statute against a particular plaintiff.” *McKay v. Federspiel*, 823 F.3d 862, 869 (6th Cir. 2016). A plaintiff need not satisfy all the *McKay* factors to establish a credible threat. *Christian Healthcare Ctrs., Inc. v. Nessel*, 117 F.4th 826, 848 (6th Cir. 2024).

Taken together, the *McKay* factors cut in Plaintiffs’ favor. First, Plaintiffs allege that they have neither operated in Michigan (Yoder and DDR) nor requested drone recovery services in Michigan (Funke) due to “fear that if they [do so] within the state, they will be subject to enforcement action and its consequences.” R. 23, PID 91. We have previously found credible fear where a plaintiff had to “censor himself to avoid violating” the statutes at issue. *See Platt v. Bd. of Comm’rs on Grievances & Discipline of Ohio Sup. Ct.*, 769 F.3d 447, 452 (6th Cir. 2014) (cleaned up).

Second, Plaintiffs allege that the MDNR “actively enforces” the Drone Statute, R. 23, PID 89, and the MDNR asserts in its briefing that it can issue citations for violating the Drone Statute.

Third, although Plaintiffs did not receive warning letters addressed to them individually, Defendants have publicly issued guidance that “addresses the central issue of” Plaintiffs’ intended conduct. *See Boone Cnty. Republican Party Exec. Comm. v. Wallace*, 132 F.4th 406, 417 (6th Cir. 2025) (finding

## Appendix 13a

that the “argument [that an advisory opinion directly addressing the plaintiffs’ conduct was not a warning letter for purposes of the *McKay* factors] elevates form over substance”).

Fourth, the Drone Statute contains no potential for exemptions that make the threat of enforcement remote. *See McKay*, 823 F.3d at 869-70.

Finally, MDNR officials have not disavowed enforcement. True, the MDNR says it has no plans “to prosecute Plaintiffs or anyone else for creating or disseminating location pins.” Appellee’s Br. at 23. But again, Plaintiffs specifically want to use drones to create location information—conduct for which the MDNR has not clearly disavowed enforcement. By contrast, MDNR has specifically advised the public that “the use of drones to pursue wildlife in any manner . . . is illegal.” Hunting Reguls. Summ. Moreover, the MDNR has not represented that it disavowed enforcement in a non-litigation context, and “the government’s disavowal must be more than a mere litigation position.” *Lopez v. Candaele*, 630 F.3d 775, 788 (9th Cir. 2010).

Accordingly, Plaintiffs have shown a credible threat of enforcement sufficient to meet their burden for demonstrating a pre-enforcement injury. *See Kareem v. Cuyahoga Cnty. Bd. of Elections*, 95 F.4th 1019, 1027 (6th Cir. 2024) (finding a credible threat of enforcement where the plaintiff faced imprisonment for violating the statute at issue, the defendant stated that the plaintiffs intended conduct was illegal and did not disavow enforcement, and the defendant had previously told an individual to not engage in the same conduct the plaintiff intended). Although Plaintiffs have not shown that the MDNR has

## Appendix 14a

previously enforced the Drone Statute, “past enforcement is not necessary to establish a credible threat of enforcement.” *Id.* at 1025.

In short, Plaintiffs have shown that they intend to engage in conduct that is at least “arguably affected with a constitutional interest,” that their intended conduct is “proscribed by a statute,” and that they face “a credible threat of prosecution” if DDR begins doing business in Michigan. *Susan B. Anthony List*, 573 U.S. at 159. Although this is a close question, “First Amendment standards . . . must give the benefit of any doubt to protecting rather than stifling speech.” *Citizens United v. Fed. Election Comm’n*, 558 U.S. 310, 327 (2010) (quotation marks and citation omitted). We thus find that Plaintiffs have plausibly alleged an injury-in-fact.

### 2. Traceability

Causation—the second prong—requires that the injury be “fairly . . . trace[able] to the challenged action of the defendant.” *Lujan*, 504 U.S. at 560 (quotation omitted). Here, Plaintiffs have alleged that the MDNR enforces the Drone Statute, and that it has statutory authority to do so. Further, MDNR conservation officers can patrol to enforce laws and regulations, Mich. Dep’t of Nat. Res., *Conservation officers*, <https://perma.cc/LXN3-LRRY>,<sup>1</sup> and the

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<sup>1</sup> Fed. R. Evid. 201(b) (“The court may judicially notice a fact that is not subject to reasonable dispute because it: (1) is generally known within the trial court’s territorial jurisdiction; or (2) can be accurately and readily determined from sources whose accuracy cannot reasonably be questioned.”); *Demis v. Sniezek*, 558 F.3d 508, 513 n. 2 (6th Cir. 2009) (taking notice of government website); *United States v. Garcia*, 855 F.3d 615, 621 (4th Cir. 2017) (“Under Federal Rule of Evidence 201(b) . . . [t]his

## Appendix 15a

MDNR acknowledges on appeal that it can issue citations for violating the Drone Statute.<sup>2</sup>

Because the MDNR “play[s] a direct role in enforcing” the Drone Statute, *Somberg v. McDonald*, 117 F.4th 375, 381 (6th Cir. 2024) (explaining that plaintiffs must sue the state actor “with power to inflict the penalty” to show causation in a pre-enforcement action); *Kareem*, 95 F.4th at 1027, the alleged violation of Plaintiffs’ First Amendment rights can be fairly traced to the MDNR.

### 3. Redressability

Redressability means that it is “likely,” not “speculative,” that a favorable decision will redress the plaintiff’s injury. *Lujan*, 504 U.S. at 561 (quotation omitted). Again, Plaintiffs allege that the MDNR’s threatened actions chill their ability to create, disseminate, and receive information about downed game using drones. And they seek “[a] declaration that the [MDNR’s] interpretation of [the Drone Statute], as applied to Plaintiffs, violates” their constitutional rights, along with a permanent injunction preventing the MDNR and its officers and agents from enforcing the Drone Statute “against Plaintiffs in a manner that prevents the creation, dissemination, and receipt of certain information.”

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court and numerous others routinely take judicial notice of information contained on state and federal government websites.” (collecting cases)).

<sup>2</sup> The MDNR’s website also suggests that conservation officers issue citations for violations of Michigan’s natural resources laws. *See, e.g.*, Mich. Dep’t of Nat. Res., *CO Biweekly Reports* (12/12/2023-1/6/2024) (Jan. 6, 2025), <https://perma.cc/U3CP-3JRA> (describing multiple incidents where conservation officers issued citations).

## Appendix 16a

R. 23, PID 93. That injunctive relief would allow Plaintiffs to provide and receive drone-based game-recovery services—thus removing the impediment to the exercise of their asserted First Amendment rights. *See Kareem*, 95 F.4th at 1027 (finding redressability met when the plaintiffs requested relief was “substantially likely to remedy her alleged injury”).

The MDNR argues that Plaintiffs’ requested injunction would not redress their injury because MDNR “officials could still issue a citation to Plaintiffs if they use a drone to chase, follow, or pursue a deer that had been shot.” Appellee’s Br. at 25. But this argument is unpersuasive unless we agree that Plaintiffs’ intended conduct can be separated into two distinct elements: flying drones and creating location information. As discussed above, in this as-applied challenge, we do not. Accordingly, Plaintiffs have shown redressability.

### **B. Merits<sup>3</sup>**

Turning to the merits of Plaintiffs’ First Amendment claims, we conclude that intermediate scrutiny applies. And because Plaintiffs have not shown that the Drone Statute fails intermediate scrutiny, their challenge must fail.

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<sup>3</sup> The MDNR argued below, and continues to argue on appeal, that the Eleventh Amendment bars Plaintiffs’ suit. The district court did not address the MDNR’s sovereign immunity arguments because other issues were dispositive. Because the same is true on appeal, we also do not reach the sovereign immunity issue.

## Appendix 17a

### 1. Level of Scrutiny

Plaintiffs offer three arguments in favor of applying strict scrutiny—that the Drone Statute is content-based, that the statute involves “speech inputs,” and that their intended conduct is inherently expressive conduct. None persuades.

#### *a. The Drone Statute is not content-based.*

Content-based laws “target speech based on its communicative content.” *Reed v. Town of Gilbert*, 576 U.S. 155, 163 (2015). The First Amendment prohibits the government from “restrict[ing] expression”—including conduct—“because of its message, its ideas, its subject matter, or its content.” *Id.* (quotation omitted). Content-based restrictions on expression must therefore satisfy strict scrutiny. *Id.* at 163-64. The distinction between content-based and content-neutral restrictions is “whether the law is justified without reference to the content of the regulated speech.” *McCullen v. Coakley*, 573 U.S. 464, 480 (2014) (internal quotation marks omitted).

The Drone Statute is content-neutral. The statute makes it a crime to “take” game—a term defined to include “hunt[ing],” “chas[ing],” “follow[ing],” “pursu[ing],” and “trap[ping]” or “captur[ing]” animals—using drones. Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40104(1). On its face, that prohibition applies equally to hunters who want to recover downed game, anti-hunting activists who want to find injured animals to nurse them back to health, and anyone else who wants to use a drone to “follow” an animal. The legislative history of the Drone Statute confirms that legislators enacted the law specifically to prevent drone use by

## Appendix 18a

both hunters and persons wishing to disrupt hunting.<sup>4</sup> And the MDNR need not examine the contents of transmissions to determine whether a pilot is violating the Drone Statute because using a drone to locate an injured animal violates the Drone Statute even if the pilot never shares a location pin with anyone else. Plaintiffs' contention that the statute is a content-based restriction because it singles out location information of downed game, and because the MDNR must look at the contents of drones' transmissions to determine whether drone users are violating the Drone Statute, is therefore un-persuasive.

Plaintiffs' argument that the Drone Statute is content-based because the MDNR allows drone use for other purposes—like assessing forest health—fares no better. Again, the relevant inquiry is “whether the law is justified without reference to the content of the regulated speech.” *McCullen*, 573 U.S. at 480 (internal quotation marks omitted). As discussed above, the Drone Statute does not ban the use of drones for taking game based on the message conveyed or the information created. *See Nat'l Press Photographers Ass'n*, 90 F.4th at 790 (finding that a statute prohibiting the use of drones to surveil others did “not directly or even primarily regulate speech and

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<sup>4</sup> Lawmakers' stated rationale for enacting the Drone Statute was two-fold. They were concerned that persons opposed to hunting, such as those affiliated with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), might use drones to “disrupt” or “interfere with lawful hunting or fishing.” R. 25-1, PID 123. They were also concerned that hunters and fishermen could use drones “to aid in taking game or fish,” thus “violat[ing] fair-chase principles and tak[ing] away from the spirit and tradition of ethical hunting and fishing.” *Id.*

## Appendix 19a

expression—nor [did it] target any particular message, idea, or subject matter”). The statute therefore does not regulate drone use based on the information the drone might create in the process, but because “of the action it entails”—pursuing injured animals. *R.A.V. v. City of St. Paul*, 505 U.S. 377, 385 (1992).

In short, the Drone Statute incidentally burdens Plaintiffs’ ability to create location information, rather than targeting expression. The law is thus content-neutral. *See Ward v. Rock Against Racism*, 491 U.S. 781, 791 (1989); *see also Turner Broad. Sys., Inc. v. FCC*, 512 U.S. 622, 645 (1994) (finding regulations content-neutral because they “distinguish between speakers in the television programming market” but do so “based only upon the manner in which speakers transmit their messages to viewers, and not upon the messages they carry”).

### *b. Drones are not speech inputs.*

Plaintiffs next argue that, because drones have recording and information-creation capabilities, drones create speech and are inputs entitled to heightened protections. In support of this argument, they point to *Lichtenstein v. Hargett*, 83 F.4th 575, 584 (6th Cir. 2023). In *Lichtenstein*, we examined several Supreme Court cases—*Sorrell*, 564 U.S. at 571 (explaining that a regulation prohibiting trade magazines from purchasing ink would be a speaker- and content-based restriction); *Buckley v. Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1, 44-45 (1976) (per curiam) (applying heightened scrutiny to a statute limiting the amount of money individuals could contribute to political candidates because it limited “core First Amendment . . . rights”); *Meyer*,

## Appendix 20a

486 U.S. at 421-22, 25 (applying heightened scrutiny to a statute that prohibited paying circulators to gather signatures to place an amendment on a state ballot); and *Buckley v. American Constitutional Law Foundation, Inc.*, 525 U.S. 182, 188, 195 (1999) (applying heightened scrutiny to a regulation that allowed only registered voters to act as petition circulators). 83 F.4th at 585-86. Relying on these cases, we suggested that regulations of certain “inputs” that create speech, such as money or ink, must survive strict scrutiny. *Id.* at 586.

*Lichtenstein* is not as broad as Plaintiffs suggest. Rather, *Lichtenstein*’s discussion of “speech inputs” refers to “inputs” that create traditional “political speech.” *Id.* at 586-87. Three of the four cases *Lichtenstein* cites for the “speech inputs” proposition involved restrictions on “core” political speech—something no party contends applies here. *Buckley*, 424 U.S. at 44-45; *Meyer*, 486 U.S. at 420; *Arn. Const. L. Found.*, 525 U.S. at 204, 210. And *Sorell*—the fourth case *Lichtenstein* cites—is inapposite because the restriction at issue in that case was a content-based restriction. 564 U.S. at 571. We therefore find that Plaintiffs have not shown that drones used to create location information for downed game are “speech inputs” meriting strict scrutiny.

*c. Flying a drone is not inherently expressive conduct.*

That leaves Plaintiffs’ third and final argument in favor of strict scrutiny: that drone use is inherently expressive conduct. Conduct that is “sufficiently imbued with elements of communication” implicates the First Amendment. *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397,

## Appendix 21a

404 (1989) (quoting *Spence v. Washington*, 418 U.S. 405, 409 (1974)). To be “inherently expressive” conduct, *Rumsfeld v. F. for Acad. & Institutional Rts., Inc.*, 547 U.S. 47, 66 (2006), the conduct must “convey a particularized message” that someone viewing the conduct would most likely understand, *Johnson*, 491 U.S. at 404 (quotation omitted). Examples of inherently expressive conduct include wearing armbands to protest a war or displaying a flag in support of a political party. See *Blau v. Fort Thomas Pub. Sch. Dist.*, 401 F.3d 381, 388-89 (6th Cir. 2005).

We agree with the Fifth Circuit that “the operation of a drone is not inherently expressive.” *Nat’l Press Photographers Ass’n*, 90 F.4th at 787. Operating a drone sends no “particularized message,” *Johnson*, 491 U.S. at 404 (quotation omitted), and certainly not one that a viewer could understand “from the conduct *alone* without any accompanying speech explaining the reasons behind it,” *Lichtenstein*, 83 F.4th at 594. And because flying a drone itself does not send any kind of message, Plaintiffs cannot convert drone use into expressive conduct “simply by talking about it.” *Rumsfeld*, 547 U.S. at 66.

Plaintiffs resist this conclusion by pointing to several out-of-circuit cases finding that making an audio or video recording is expressive activity: *Animal Legal Defense Fund v. Wasden*, 878 F.3d 1184, 1204 (9th Cir. 2018); *Kemp*, 86 F.4th at 779; and *360 Virtual Drone Services LLC v. Ritter*, No. 5:21-CV-137, 2023 WL 2759032, at \*9 (E.D.N.C. Mar. 31, 2023). But none of those cases are on point because Plaintiffs allege that they capture only location information, not audio or video recordings. See *FCC v. Pacifica Found.*, 438 U.S. 726, 748 (1978) (“We have

## Appendix 22a

long recognized that each medium of expression presents special First Amendment problems.”). Additionally, the Ninth Circuit has since clarified that *Wasden* does not stand for the proposition that all recording is expressive activity. *Project Veritas v. Schmidt*, 125 F.4th 929, 946 (9th Cir. 2025) (en banc) (“*Wasden* reasoned that it defied common sense to disaggregate the creation of the video, which may involve expressive decisions, from the video or audio recording itself . . . . *Wasden* did not conclude that every act of recording requires expressive decisions, nor that every act of recording implicates the First Amendment.” (cleaned up)). Accordingly, we decline to treat the proposed drone operation in this case as expressive conduct requiring the application of strict scrutiny.

### **2. Application of Intermediate Scrutiny**

Intermediate scrutiny applies to regulations that are content-neutral and do not rise to a level requiring strict scrutiny. *Turner Broad. Sys., Inc.*, 512 U.S. at 662; *Barnes v. Glen Theatre, Inc.*, 501 U.S. 560, 567 (1991) (intermediate scrutiny applies when “speech and nonspeech elements are combined in the same course of conduct” (internal quotation marks and citation omitted)); *Johnson*, 491 U.S. at 407 (1989) (intermediate scrutiny applies to regulations of conduct “unrelated to the suppression of free expression” (quotation omitted)). We therefore apply it here. *Accord Nat’l Press Photographers Ass’n*, 90 F.4th at 788 (applying intermediate scrutiny to a facial challenge to a prohibition on capturing images using a drone while conducting surveillance).

## Appendix 23a

Under intermediate scrutiny, a statute is constitutional “if it is within the constitutional power of the Government; if it furthers an important or substantial governmental interest; if the governmental interest is unrelated to the suppression of free expression; and if the incidental restriction on alleged First Amendment freedoms is no greater than is essential to the furtherance of that interest.” *United States v. O’Brien*, 391 U.S. 367, 377 (1968). “[H]ighly general interests that are obviously important” can satisfy the governmental interest prong. *Lichtenstein*, 83 F.4th at 596-97.

Michigan has constitutional and statutory authority to enact the Drone Statute, which conserves and preserves its natural resources. Michigan’s constitution empowers the Michigan legislature to “provide for the protection of . . . natural resources of the state.” Mich. Const. art. IV, § 52. That includes regulating the taking of game. *People v. Zimberg*, 33 N.W.2d 104, 106-07 (Mich. 1948). Moreover, the Michigan Legislature has previously determined that “hunting, fishing, and the taking of game are “a valued part of the cultural heritage of [Michigan] [that] should be forever preserved.” Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40113a(3).

The Drone Statute furthers those important conservation and preservation interests. Again, the legislative history of the Drone Statute demonstrates that the Michigan Legislature passed the Drone Statute to preserve fair-chase principles and prevent anti-hunting activists from disrupting hunting. And managing how hunters can hunt Michigan’s wild animals is an important state interest. *See Clark v. Cmty. for Creative Non-Violence*, 468 U.S. 288, 299

## Appendix 24a

(1984) (observing that conserving park property is a substantial interest under *O'Brien*).

As explained above, the Drone Statute incidentally burdens expression, rather than targeting it. It is thus “unrelated to the suppression of free expression.” *O'Brien*, 391 U.S. at 377.

Finally, the Drone Statute restricts First Amendment expression no more than necessary. A statute is sufficiently narrowly tailored to survive intermediate scrutiny when “an adequate relationship exists between the means (the conduct ban) and the ends (the government interest) as long as the interest ‘would be achieved less effectively’ without the ban.” *Lichtenstein*, 83 F.4th at 598 (quoting *Rumsfeld*, 547 U.S. at 67). In other words, the statute “need only ‘further’ the [government’s] interest.” *Id.* (quoting *City of Erie v. Pap’s A.M.*, 529 U.S. 277, 301 (2000) (plurality opinion)); see also *Clark*, 468 U.S. at 297 (“[I]f the parks would be more exposed to harm without the sleeping prohibition than with it, the ban is safe from invalidation under the First Amendment . . .”).

The Drone Statute is narrowly tailored because it would be harder for Michigan to achieve its stated interests—protecting its natural resources and preserving fair-chase principles in hunting—without banning the use of drones to take game. Making an exception for using drones to create location information for downed game might not necessarily threaten those interests. But “[t]he First Amendment does not ban application of a neutral regulation that incidentally burdens speech merely because a party contends that allowing an exception in the particular case will not threaten important government in-

Appendix 25a

terests.” *United States v. Albertini*, 472 U.S. 675, 688 (1985); *see also FTC v. Superior Ct. Trial L. Ass’n*, 493 U.S. 411, 430 (1990). Accordingly, it is enough for the MDNR to show that prohibiting the use of drones to take game furthers Michigan’s stated, important interests. Plaintiffs therefore have failed to state a claim on which relief can be granted.

\* \* \*

For the reasons set out above, we AFFIRM.

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**CONCURRENCE**

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MATHIS, Circuit Judge, concurring in the judgment. Michigan law bars the use of drones to hunt or collect game animals. This creates a problem for Mike Yoder and his company, Drone Deer Recovery LLC. As the name of the company suggests, Drone Deer Recovery uses drones to help hunters locate and recover downed deer. Drone Deer Recovery operates in several states and it now seeks to expand to Michigan, as its potential customer, Jeremy Funke, lives and hunts there.

Yoder, Drone Deer Recovery, and Funke sued the director of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. They argue that the prohibition on using drones to hunt or collect downed deer violates their free-speech rights because it prevents Drone Deer Recovery from using a drone to communicate location information about a downed deer to a hunter such as Funke. The district court dismissed their complaint for lack of subject-matter jurisdiction and for failure to state a claim. I would affirm the district court’s

## Appendix 26a

decision because Plaintiffs have not established Article III standing.

### I.

#### A.

The Michigan Constitution declares that “[t]he conservation and development of the natural resources of the state are . . . of paramount public concern.” Mich. Const. art. IV, § 52. It authorizes the Michigan legislature to “provide for the protection of the . . . natural resources of the state.” *Id.* Under this authority, the Michigan legislature has acted to regulate the hunting of game. The Michigan legislature has determined that hunting, fishing, and the taking of game are: (1) “a valued part of the cultural heritage of [Michigan] [that] should be forever preserved”; (2) important to the state’s economy; and (3) vital to the conservation and preservation of its natural resources. Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40113a(3).

One such regulation is at issue. In 2015, the Michigan legislature passed the Drone Statute, which provides, in pertinent part: “An individual shall not take game or fish using an unmanned vehicle or unmanned device that uses aerodynamic forces to achieve flight[.]” *Id.* § 324.40111c(2). “‘Take’ means to hunt with any weapon, dog, raptor, or other wild or domestic animal trained for that purpose; kill; chase; follow; harass; harm; pursue; shoot; rob; trap; capture; or collect animals, or to attempt to engage in such an activity.” *Id.* § 324.40104(1). And “game” includes 39 wild animals, including deer. *Id.* § 324.40103(1). A violation of the Drone Statute is a misdemeanor punishable by a fine or imprisonment. *Id.* § 324.40118(1).

## Appendix 27a

The Michigan legislature created the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to “protect and conserve” Michigan’s “natural resources.” *Id.* §§ 324.501(1); 324.503(1). MDNR has regulatory authority over “manag[ing] animals” in Michigan, which includes determining “lawful methods of taking game.” *Id.* § 324.40107(l)(e). It requires anyone who kills or wounds a game animal to make a reasonable attempt to retrieve the animal. Mich. Dep’t of Nat. Res., Wildlife Conservation Ord., ch. IV, § 4.1(2). MDNR has explained that the Drone Statute prohibits individuals from using drones to locate or recover injured game:

The use of drones to pursue wildlife in any manner, either during legal hunting hours or after, is illegal. You may not take game or fish using an unmanned vehicle or unmanned device that uses aerodynamic forces to achieve flight or using an unmanned vehicle or unmanned device that operates on the surface of water or underwater. . . . Attempting to locate and/or recover game, either dead or wounded, is an act which falls within the definition of “take.”

See Mich. Dep’t of Nat. Res., 2023 Mich. Hunting Reguls. Summary, 25.<sup>1</sup>

### **B.**

Plaintiffs seek to challenge the constitutionality of the Drone Statute. Jeremy Funke hunts deer and other game on private and public land in Michigan. After a hunter (like Funke) shoots an animal, it often

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cms2.revize.com/revize/washingtonmi/2023%20Michigan%20Hunting%20Regulations%20Summary.pdf>.

## Appendix 28a

runs away and dies in a distant location, making it difficult for the hunter to locate and retrieve it. This is where Mike Yoder and Drone Deer Recovery come in. Yoder, who is also a hunter, developed Drone Deer Recovery to use drones to locate downed deer.

Drone Deer Recovery's service is straightforward. Using its website, a hunter can find a drone operator (like Yoder) in the area to locate a lost deer. The operator will dispatch a drone to the area. The drone then uses an infrared camera and thermal imaging to search for the downed animal's heat signature. Once the drone finds a heat signature, the operator activates the camera and searchlights to identify the animal. If the operator confirms it is dead or dying, he uses the drone to create a location pin with the animal's coordinates. The operator then sends the location information to the hunter, who can then retrieve the animal. Yoder and Drone Deer Recovery allege that the Drone Statute prevents them from operating in Michigan. "DNR officials have advised Drone Deer Recovery that it is unlawful under state law to use drones in any manner related to hunting." R. 23, PageID 89. So Yoder and Drone Deer Recovery do not operate in Michigan (and Funke does not use their services) for fear of violating Michigan law.

## II.

Federal courts have subject-matter jurisdiction over "Cases" and "Controversies." U.S. Const. art. III, § 2, cl. 1. So before considering a claim's merits, a plaintiff must establish that it has standing to sue. *Kitchen v. Whitmer*, 106 F.4th 525, 533 (6th Cir. 2024).

## Appendix 29a

Standing requires the plaintiff to “have a personal stake in the case.” *Trans Union LLC v. Ramirez*, 594 U.S. 413, 423 (2021) (citation modified). “The doctrine of standing gives meaning” to Article III “by identifying those disputes which are appropriately resolved through the judicial process.” *Susan B. Anthony List v. Driehaus*, 573 U.S. 149, 157 (2014) (citation modified). “[A] citizen does not have standing to challenge a government regulation simply because the plaintiff believes that the government is acting illegally.” *FDA v. All. For Hippocratic Med.*, 602 U.S. 367, 381 (2024). To establish standing, a plaintiff must show that: (1) he “has suffered or likely will suffer an injury in fact,” (2) “the injury likely was caused or will be caused by the defendant,” and (3) “the injury likely would be redressed by the requested judicial relief.” *Id.* at 380.

Plaintiffs bear the burden of proving standing. *Spokeo, Inc. v. Robins*, 578 U.S. 330, 338 (2016). They must establish standing “in the same way as any other matter on which the plaintiff bears the burden of proof, *i.e.*, with the manner and degree of evidence required at the successive stages of the litigation.” *Lujan v. Defs. of Wildlife*, 504 U.S. 555, 561 (1992). Because the district court dismissed this case at the pleading stage, Plaintiffs needed to “clearly allege facts demonstrating” standing. *Spokeo*, 578 U.S. at 338 (citation modified).

Typically, “a statute must be enforced against the plaintiff before he may challenge its constitutionality.” *Phillips v. DeWine*, 841 F.3d 405, 415 (6th Cir. 2016). That said, a plaintiff can bring a pre-enforcement challenge “under circumstances that render the threatened enforcement sufficiently

## Appendix 30a

imminent.” *Susan B. Anthony List*, 573 U.S. at 159. Indeed, “where threatened action by *government* is concerned, we do not require a plaintiff to expose himself to liability before bringing suit to challenge the basis for the threat.” *MedImmune, Inc. v. Genentech, Inc.*, 549 U.S. 118, 128-29 (2007).

Plaintiffs bring a pre-enforcement challenge against MDNR. “In a pre-enforcement challenge, whether the plaintiff has standing to sue often turns upon whether he can demonstrate an ‘injury in fact’ before the state has actually commenced an enforcement proceeding against him.” *Kiser v. Reitz*, 765 F.3d 601, 607 (6th Cir. 2014). Plaintiffs cannot show that they will likely suffer an injury in fact.

An injury in fact is “an invasion of a legally protected interest which is (a) concrete and particularized, and (b) actual or imminent, not conjectural or hypothetical.” *Lujan*, 504 U.S. at 560 (citation modified). A plaintiff establishes an injury in fact in a pre-enforcement action if “he alleges an intention to engage in a course of conduct arguably affected with a constitutional interest, but proscribed by a statute, and there exists a credible threat of prosecution thereunder.” *Susan B. Anthony List*, 573 U.S. at 159 (citation modified). I assume that Plaintiffs have alleged their intent to engage in constitutionally protected conduct proscribed by the Drone Statute.

Still, Plaintiffs needed to show a credible threat of enforcement of the Drone Statute against them by MDNR. To that end, Plaintiffs must have “an actual and well-founded fear that the law will be enforced against them.” *Virginia v. Am. Booksellers Ass’n*, 484 U.S. 383, 393 (1988). But “mere allegations of a

## Appendix 31a

subjective chill on protected speech are insufficient.” *McKay v. Federspiel*, 823 F.3d 862, 868 (6th Cir. 2016) (citation modified). Instead, the plaintiff must show subjective chill and a combination of the factors below (the *McKay* factors):

(1) a history of past enforcement against the plaintiffs or others; (2) enforcement warning letters sent to the plaintiffs regarding their specific conduct; (3) an attribute of the challenged statute that makes enforcement easier or more likely, such as a provision allowing any member of the public to initiate an enforcement action; and (4) the defendant’s refusal to disavow enforcement of the challenged statute against a particular plaintiff.

*Christian Healthcare Ctrs., Inc. v. Nessel*, 117 F.4th 826, 848 (6th Cir. 2024) (citation modified). The “*McKay* factors are not exhaustive,” and a plaintiff need not satisfy all the factors to establish a credible threat. *Online Merchs. Guild v. Cameron*, 995 F.3d 540, 550 (6th Cir. 2021).

Plaintiffs allege subjective chill here. They do not operate in Michigan because they “fear enforcement action and its consequences.” R. 23, PageID 91 (citation modified). So I turn to whether Plaintiffs have pleaded sufficiently a combination of the *McKay* factors.

*Past Enforcement.* Plaintiffs have not established a history of past enforcement of the Drone Statute by MDNR. The Supreme Court has explained “that past enforcement against the same conduct is good evidence that the threat of enforcement is not chimerical.” *Susan B. Anthony List*, 573 U.S. at 164

## Appendix 32a

(citation modified). “A threat of enforcement is most credible when the *same conduct* has drawn enforcement actions or threats of enforcement in the past.” *Christian Healthcare Ctrs.*, 117 F.4th at 848 (citation modified).

Plaintiffs say that MDNR “actively enforces the ban on drones” under the Drone Statute. R. 23, PageID 89. In support, they point to emails MDNR enforcement officials sent to Mike Cassells and Daniel Schultz, two individuals “interested in using drone location.” *Id.* Plaintiffs allege that the emails stated that “using drones to locate downed deer in Michigan is illegal,” and that “the use of drones related to locating wildlife in any manner is illegal.” *Id.* But general statements that MDNR “actively enforces the ban on drones” or that an action is illegal are not enforcement actions or threats. *See Boone Cnty. Republican Party Exec. Comm. v. Wallace*, 132 F.4th 406, 416 (6th Cir. 2025) (“generalized contention” that the defendant “actively enforces” a statute “offers little support for the argument that the [defendant] will enforce here”).

Indeed, Plaintiffs never alleged that MDNR enforced the Drone Statute against them or any other drone operators. *See Fischer v. Thomas*, 52 F.4th 303, 308 (6th Cir. 2022) (per curiam) (“[W]e allow [plaintiffs] to meet this factor by pointing to past enforcement against others.”). True enough, “a plaintiff need not always show that the statute has been enforced previously against the precise conduct it wishes to undertake.” *Christian Healthcare Ctrs.*, 117 F.4th at 849. But Plaintiffs fail to allege *any* instances of enforcement since the legislature enacted the Drone Statute in 2015.

## Appendix 33a

*Warning Letter.* Plaintiffs have not alleged that MDNR sent them a warning letter. They do allege, however, that MDNR’s “agents or employees have recently explicitly articulated the DNR’s position on the legality of [Drone Deer Recovery]’s business,” presumably through the emails to Cassells and Schultz. R. 23, PageID 91. Plaintiffs also noted in their briefing that MDNR issued guidance stating that “[t]he use of drones to pursue wildlife in any manner, either during legal hunting hours or after, is illegal,” and that “[a]ttempting to locate and/or recover game, either dead or wounded, is an act which falls within the definition of ‘take.’” *See* Mich. Dep’t of Nat. Res., 2023 Mich. Hunting Reguls. Summary, 25. But neither the emails nor the guidance is an “enforcement warning letter[] sent to the plaintiffs regarding their specific conduct.” *McKay*, 823 F.3d at 869 (emphasis added).

To begin, neither was directed at Plaintiffs. *See id.* The guidance addresses the public at large. And MDNR emailed Cassells and Schultz, not Plaintiffs. The complaint also fails to allege that MDNR’s emails addressed Plaintiffs specifically. *See id.* (signs threatening enforcement did not show credible threat of enforcement in part because they “address the general public, not [the plaintiff] specifically or any of his past conduct”).

Consider the warning letters in *Fischer*. There, this court found a credible enforcement threat when the letters “warned that [the defendant] had launched a preliminary investigation into [the plaintiffs’] conduct.” 52 F.4th at 308; *see also Winter v. Wolnitzek*, 834 F.3d 681, 687 (6th Cir. 2016) (finding credible threat of enforcement when letter stated that the

## Appendix 34a

defendant had “probable cause for action” against the plaintiff for her conduct (quotation omitted). Plaintiffs make no similar allegations here. As a result, this factor weighs against them.

*Ease of Enforcement.* Plaintiffs point to nothing about the Drone Statute “that makes enforcement easier or more likely.” *See McKay*, 823 F.3d at 869. The credibility of a threat of enforcement increases when the statute allows “any member of the public to initiate an enforcement action,” *id.*, rather than when it is “limited to a prosecutor or an agency,” *Susan B. Anthony List*, 573 U.S. at 164. A violation of the Drone Statute can lead to criminal penalties, Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40118(1), which means a prosecutor can enforce the statute. *See Friends of George’s, Inc. v. Mulroy*, 108 F.4th 431, 440 (6th Cir. 2024) (concluding criminal statute was “a standard criminal law with no attributes making enforcement easier or more likely”). And MDNR has conceded that it can issue a citation for a violation of the statute. But Plaintiffs do not allege that members of the public can file complaints or initiate enforcement. *See, e.g., Wallace*, 132 F.4th at 417; *Fischer*, 52 F.4th at 308-09. So this factor weighs against Plaintiffs too.

*Disavowal.* MDNR asserts in its belief that it has no “plan to prosecute Plaintiffs or anyone else for creating or disseminating location[] pins.” D. 21 at p.30. This purported disavowal falls flat. Plaintiffs intend to create location information *using a drone*. And MDNR has not disavowed prosecuting them for such conduct. So this factor weighs in Plaintiffs’ favor.

\* \* \*

Plaintiffs have established only one of the *McKay* factors-refusal to disavow enforcement. Yet disavowal

## Appendix 35a

“is just one data point among many on the question [of] whether a credible threat of enforcement exists.” *Davis v. Colerain Township*, 51 F.4th 164, 174 (6th Cir. 2022). The other *McKay* factors confirm that Plaintiffs have alleged no “circumstances that render . . . threatened enforcement sufficiently imminent.” *Susan B. Anthony List*, 573 U.S. at 159. They fail to identify a history of enforcement of the Drone Statute, that they received a warning letter, or that an attribute of the Drone Statute makes enforcement easier.

With no credible threat of enforcement, Plaintiffs cannot show an injury in fact. Plaintiffs therefore lack standing.

Appendix 36a

Case 1:23-cv-00796 ECF No. 28 Filed 06/18/24

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
WESTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN  
SOUTHERN DIVISION

MIKE YODER, *et al.*,  
Plaintiffs,

v.

SCOTT BOWEN, IN HIS  
OFFICIAL CAPACITY AS  
DIRECTOR OF THE  
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT  
OF NATURAL RESOURCES  
Defendant.

No. 1:23-cv-796

Honorable  
Paul L. Maloney

**ORDER RESOLVING MOTION TO DISMISS**

This matter comes before the court on Defendant's motion to dismiss under Federal Rules of Civil Procedure 12(b)(1) and 12(b)(6). (ECF No. 24). Plaintiffs filed a response in opposition, (ECF No. 26) and Defendant filed a reply brief. (ECF No. 27). The court will grant the motion.

**I. Background**

Mike Yoder owns and operates Drone Deer Recovery ("DDR"), an Ohio LLC. Mr. Yoder and his company assist hunters and locate downed game using drones. Mr. Yoder wants to expand his business to Michigan. Jeremy Funke is a Michigan resident and hunter who would like to use DDR's services. Mr. Bowen is the Director of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources ("DNR"). DNR officials assert that DDR's services would violate Michigan

## Appendix 37a

law. Plaintiffs allege that the DNR is violating their First Amendment Right to freedom of speech. (ECF No. 23).

In this as applied challenge, Plaintiffs seek a permanent injunction restraining the DNR and its agents from enforcing M.C.L. § 324.40111c against them. The relevant statute, referred to as the “Drone Statute,” states the following:

An individual shall not take game or fish using an unmanned vehicle or unmanned device that uses aerodynamic forces to achieve flight or using an unmanned vehicle or unmanned device that operates on the surface of water or underwater.

M.C.L. § 324.40111c(2). The Michigan Legislature defines “take” as “to hunt with any weapon, dog, raptor, or other wild or domestic animal trained for that purpose; kill; chase; follow; harass; harm; pursue; shoot; rob; trap; capture; or collect animals, or to attempt to engage in such an activity.” M.C.L. § 324.40104(1).

In Michigan, some hunters spend countless hours preparing for hunting season. They plant food plots, build blinds, install motion cameras, and clear brush for shooting lanes. Come fall, hunters fill the forests and fields. Some hunters are lucky enough to harvest a deer and fill their tags, others are not. Perhaps some of the unluckiest are those who wound a deer but never find it in the woods. In comes DDR.

DDR uses unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, to find downed game. DDR’s drones use infrared cameras and thermal imagery to track deer and their heat signatures. Once found, the DDR pilot marks the

## Appendix 38a

location of the deer for the hunter. Per the first amended complaint, DDR receives frequent requests for deer recovery services in Michigan but is forced to reject them for fear of the DNR, which advised them that DDR's services would be illegal in Michigan. DNR interprets "use" to include "locate." Thus, when a drone locates an animal's carcass after it has been downed by a hunter, the drone is being "used" to "collect" that animal, allegedly in violation of M.C.L. § 324.40111c(2). The collection of an animal's carcass is defined as a taking under Michigan law. M.C.L. § 324.40104(1).

The first amended complaint alleges that the DNR's interpretation of the Michigan's Drone Statute, M.C.L. § 324.40111c(2), is a content-based restriction on speech "because it singles out a particular type of speech, namely location information pertaining to downed game, and prohibits its creation and dissemination if it will be used to collect the game." (ECF No. 23 at PID 91). The DNR moved to dismiss the complaint.

### II. Legal Standard

To survive a motion to dismiss under 12(b)(1), a plaintiff must show Article III standing. *Davis v. Detroit Pub. Sch. Cmty. Dist.*, F. App'x 18, 22–23 (6th Cir. 2020) [sic]. At this stage, the court "must accept as true all material allegations of the complaint and must construe the complaint in favor of the complaining party." *Parsons v. U.S. Dep't. of Justice*, 801 F.3d 701, 710 (6th Cir. 2015). To establish standing, a plaintiff must show (1) an actual or imminent injury in fact; (2) a causal connection between the injury and the defendant; and (3) that the

## Appendix 39a

injury is redressable by a favorable judicial decision. *Lujan v. Defenders of Wildlife*, 504 U.S. 555, 560–61 (1992).

A motion to dismiss for failure to state a claim under Rule 12(b)(6) tests whether a cognizable claim has been pled in the complaint. *Scheid v. Fanny Farmer Candy Shops, Inc.*, 859 F.2d 434, 436 (6th Cir. 1988). To survive a motion to dismiss, a plaintiff must allege facts sufficient to state a claim for relief that is “plausible on its face” and, when accepted as true, are sufficient to “raise a right to relief above the speculative level.” *Mills v. Barnard*, 869 F.3d 473, 479 (6th Cir. 2017) (citation omitted). “The complaint must ‘contain either direct or inferential allegations respecting all material elements necessary for recovery under a viable legal theory.’” *Kreipke v. Wayne State Univ.*, 807 F.3d 768, 774 (6th Cir. 2015) (citation omitted). To resolve a motion to dismiss, a court must accept as true all factual allegations, but it need not accept any legal conclusions. *Ctr. for Bio-Ethical Reform, Inc. v. Napolitano*, 648 F.3d 365, 369 (6th Cir. 2011).

### III. Analysis

The DNR moved to dismiss on three grounds: a lack of jurisdiction, Eleventh Amendment immunity,<sup>1</sup> and because Plaintiffs failed to state a claim. When reviewing the complaint, conduct alleged can best be divided into halves. First, a drone operator uses a drone to find wounded game. Second, the drone operator relays that information to the hunter.

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<sup>1</sup> Because other arguments dispose of this matter, the court will not address this argument.

## Appendix 40a

### A.

The DNR argues that Plaintiffs lack standing because they did not plead an ongoing harm of a constitutional nature. In the DNR's view, the complaint alleges that Plaintiffs have a right to tell someone that they located deer using a drone, but locating a deer with a drone is not the activity Plaintiffs allege is protected by the Constitution. The DNR bifurcates the acts alleged in the complaint: flying the drone to track the deer and then telling the hunter where the deer is located. Said another way, enforcing the Drone Statute against Plaintiffs would only prohibit the tracking of the deer with a drone, not any speech that followed. For example, if Mr. Yoder were to shoot a deer, track it with his drone, and tell no one, he would still be in violation of the Drone Statute. In the DNR's view, it is not the speech that is being regulated, but just the act of flying the drone.

The complaint seeks a "permanent injunction restraining Defendant and Defendant's officers, agents, affiliates, servants, successors, employees, and all other persons in active concert or participation with Defendant from enforcing Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c against Plaintiffs in a manner that prevents the creation, dissemination, and receipt of certain information." (ECF No. 23 at PID 93). The DNR argues that even if the court were to grant Plaintiffs' request, tracking wounded game with a drone would nonetheless remain illegal, leaving no redress for Plaintiffs. Plaintiffs do not require a drone for the "creation, dissemination, and receipt of certain information."

In response, Mr. Yoder argues he "wants to communicate the pinpoint location of downed game

## Appendix 41a

based on information he gathers from his drones, and Mr. Funke wants to receive that communication.” (ECF No. 26 at PID 135). Mr. Yoder characterizes his drone flying as the “creation and dissemination” of information. Mr. Yoder then cites to some cases indicating that recording and filming is protected speech. *See, e.g., Kaplan v. California*, 413 U.S. 115, 119 (1973) (“The Court has applied similarly conceived First Amendment standards to moving pictures, to photographs, and to words in books.”). Mr. Yoder also insists that the processes required for public expression are also protected by the First Amendment. *See, e.g., Fields v. City of Phila.*, 862 F.3d 353, 358 (3d Cir. 2017) (“The First Amendment protects actual photos, videos, and recordings . . . and for this protection to have meaning the Amendment must also protect the act of creating that material.”).

The court finds that Plaintiffs lack standing to challenge this provision. Plaintiff’s conduct can best be separated into two elements: flying a drone to track downed game (illegal and regulated) and relaying the location of the game to patron hunters (legal and unregulated). The Drone Statute prohibits an individual from “tak[ing] game or fish using [a drone].” M.C.L. § 324.40111c(2). Nothing in the Drone Statute contemplates speech or its regulation.<sup>2</sup> The DNR’s interpretation of the statute as applied to Plaintiffs only bars the conduct of using the drone as contemplated in the Drone Statute. The Drone Statute does not regulate Plaintiffs’ ability to send

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<sup>2</sup> Plaintiffs’ brief acknowledges the same: “Nothing in the text of the Drone Statute prohibits the flying of drones in general, or the gathering and transmission of location information.” (ECF No. 26 at PID 132).

## Appendix 42a

and receive information regarding downed game. Plaintiffs are free to track downed deer in a different manner and relay their findings. Plaintiffs' ability to relay the location information is not regulated by the Drone Statute, just flying the drone.

While this argument overlaps with the analysis below, the court is persuaded by the DNR's redressability argument. Redressability requires that "it must be 'likely,' as opposed to merely 'speculative,' that the injury will be 'redressed by a favorable decision.'" *Lujan*, 504 U.S. at 561 (citing *Simon v. E. Kentucky Welfare Rts. Org.*, 426 U.S. 26, 38 (1976)). Even if the court were to enjoin "Defendant from enforcing Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c against Plaintiffs in a manner that prevents the creation, dissemination, and receipt of certain information," flying a drone to locate downed game would still be prohibited. Therefore, Plaintiffs lack standing.

### **B.**

The DNR moved to dismiss because the Drone Statute regulates conduct, not speech. The threshold question for First Amendment claims like those here is whether the challenged provision regulates protected speech. *See United States v. O'Brien*, 391 U.S. 367, 376 (1968) (rejecting a "limitless" definition of protected speech). "Inherently expressive" conduct has been afforded protection under the First Amendment. *See Rumsfeld v. Forum for Acad. and Inst. Rights, Inc.*, 547 U.S. 47, 66 (2006). A speaker cannot avoid government regulations simply by explaining the conduct and demanding the protection of the First Amendment. *Id.* ("If combining speech and conduct were enough to create expressive conduct, a

## Appendix 43a

regulated party could always transform conduct into ‘speech’ simply by talking about it.”).

To frame this inquiry, the court returns to the breakdown of Plaintiffs’ conduct into two steps. The first is flying the drone and tracking downed game, and the second consists of disseminating that information to the hunter. As the court concluded above, the Drone Statute does not regulate the second step of the process—relaying the location of the downed game. What’s left, then, is whether flying the drone, and scanning the wilderness “with a powerful long-zoom, infrared camera, thermal imaging technology” constitutes speech. (ECF No. 23 at PID 88). Plaintiffs insist they are creating information, which is entitled to First Amendment protection.

Drone usage is relatively new in the free speech arena, but the Fifth Circuit addressed a similar issue in *National Press Photographers Association v. McCraw*, 90 F.4th 770 (5th Cir. 2024). The court addressed whether no fly provisions violated the First Amendment and concluded that they did not. *McCraw*, 90 F.4th at 787. The relevant Texas statute made it unlawful to “fly a drone under 400 feet above a correctional facility, detention facility, critical infrastructure facility, or sports venue, subject to a number of exceptions. *Id.* A group of journalists sued and argued that the no-fly provision regulated speech because their drones were often used for photography. *Id.* The court cited the following from the Supreme Court:

There are few restrictions on action which could not be clothed by ingenious argument in the garb of decreased data flow. For example, the prohibition of unauthorized entry into the White

## Appendix 44a

House diminishes the citizen's opportunities to gather information he might find relevant to his opinion of the way the country is being run, but that does not make entry into the White House a First Amendment right. The right to speak and publish does not carry with it the unrestrained right to gather information.

*Id.* at 787 (quoting *Zemel v. Rusk*, 381 U.S. 1, 17 (1965)). The court concluded on this point, “the No-Fly provisions have nothing to do with speech or even expressive activity . . . they do not implicate the First Amendment.” *McCraw*, 90 F.4th at 788.

Plaintiffs reject the distinction between flying a drone and relaying the location of downed game to a hunter. Plaintiffs argue that because Mr. Yoder “depends on a drone to create and convey speech,” the Drone Statute “abridges Mr. Yoder’s speech activity by restricting his use of drones.” (ECF No. 26 a PID 140). In support of their position, Plaintiffs rely on select quotes from *Lichtenstein v. Hargett*, 83 F.4th 575 (6th Cir. 2023). *Lichtenstein* concerned a Tennessee law that made it a crime for anyone other than election officials to distribute the official form used to apply to vote absentee. 83 F.4th at 585. Ultimately, the court held that the law did not violate the plaintiff’s First Amendment free speech rights for reasons inapplicable here, *Id.* at 583, but in dicta, the court mused about what could impede and implicate speech. The court explained that the “government might restrict the ‘inputs’ that speakers use to express a message.” *Id.* at 585. The court explained that if the government “banned the sale of ink for the use in political pamphlets, it ostensibly would be regulating conduct—the sale of a commodity . . . but the Court

## Appendix 45a

would rigorously review this law because it targets certain speakers by burdening the written words for which they will use the ink.”

On this point, the court disagrees with Plaintiffs. Tracking downed game does not depend on the use of a drone; hunters can find game through other means. Likewise, relaying the location of downed game is not regulated by the Drone Statute. A statute that makes it more difficult to gather information, or cuts off one approach, does not automatically implicate the protections of the First Amendment. *Zemel*, 381 U.S. at 17. Additionally, the dicta example from *Lichtenstein* is not analogous to this action. In the Sixth Circuit’s example, a government passed a law which ultimately restricted certain speakers—those creating political pamphlets—and banned the sale of ink, which was necessary to create those pamphlets. In this instance, Michigan passed a drone usage law designed to protect the resource and hunters alike in a manner directed at conduct. Further, drones are not the typical “inputs” that society relies on for speech, unlike the written or spoken word. The Drone Statute does not regulate speech.

Finally, Plaintiffs’ attempt to distinguish *McCraw* fails. Plaintiffs argue that the no-fly law restricted where individuals could fly and that the Drone Statute restricts what an individual may do with a drone. But either way, both laws restrict what is observable by the drone. The Texas law at issue in *McCraw* prevented journalists from using a drone near sensitive areas, which necessarily limited what they could do and view with drones.

Appendix 46a

**IV. Conclusion**

The court finds that Plaintiffs lack standing and fail to state a claim under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6). In short, flying a drone for game tracking purposes does not implicate the First Amendment's protection of speech, and M.C.L. § 324.40111c(2) does not prevent an individual from relaying location information to hunters.

**IT IS HEREBY ORDERED** that Defendant's motion to dismiss (ECF No. 24) is **GRANTED**.

**IT IS SO ORDERED.**

Date: June 18, 2024

/s/ Paul L. Maloney

Paul L. Maloney

United States District Judge

Appendix 47a

Case: 24-1593 Document: 31-2 Filed: 10/03/2025

RECOMMENDED FOR PUBLICATION  
Pursuant to Sixth Circuit I.O.P. 32.1(b)

**UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS**  
**FOR THE SIXTH CIRCUIT**

MIKE YODER; DRONE  
DEER RECOVERY LLC,  
identified on initiating  
documents as Drone  
Deer Recovery Media,  
Inc.; JEREMY FUNKE,  
*Plaintiffs-Appellants,*

No. 24-1593

v.

SCOTT BOWEN, in his  
official capacity as  
Director of the Michigan  
Department of Natural  
Resources, identified on  
initiating document as  
Shannon Lott,  
*Defendant-Appellee.*

On Petition for Rehearing En Banc

United States District Court for the Western District  
of Michigan at Grand Rapids.  
No. 1:23-cv-00796—Paul Lewis Maloney, District  
Judge.

Decided and Filed: October 3, 2025

Appendix 48a

Before: COLE, WHITE, and MATHIS, Circuit  
Judges.

\* \* \* \* \*

The court delivered an ORDER denying the petition for rehearing en banc. BUSH, J. (pp. 3-9), delivered a separate statement respecting the denial of the petition for rehearing en banc.

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**ORDER**

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The court received a petition for rehearing en banc. The original panel has reviewed the petition for rehearing and concludes that the issues raised in the petition were fully considered upon the original submission and decision.

The petition was then circulated to the full court. No judge requested a vote on the suggestion for rehearing en banc.

Therefore, the petition is denied.

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**STATEMENT**

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JOHN K. BUSH, Circuit Judge, respecting the denial of rehearing en banc. This case involves an as-applied challenge to a Michigan law (the drone statute) that makes it illegal to “us[e] an unmanned vehicle or unmanned device that uses aerodynamic forces to achieve flight”—i.e., a drone—while “tak[ing] game or fish.” Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c(2). Drone Deer Recovery, a plaintiff here, offers a service where it tracks downed animals using drones and

## Appendix 49a

then posts the location of the animals' carcasses online so hunters can more easily find their kill. *See Yoder v. Bowen*, 146 F.4th 516, 520 (6th Cir. 2025) (per curiam) (panel opinion). The plaintiffs allege that the drone statute violates their First Amendment rights because it (1) is a content-based speech restriction, (2) violates the speech-inputs doctrine,<sup>1</sup> and (3) unconstitutionally restricts their ability to engage in inherently expressive conduct. *Id.* at 527. The panel rejected all three arguments and determined that the statute survived intermediate scrutiny. *See id.*

I write separately because I have concerns about the panel's reasoning related to the speech-inputs doctrine. The Supreme Court has indicated that "heightened scrutiny"—something more than *O'Brien* intermediate scrutiny<sup>2</sup>—applies when the government seeks to ban the means to create speech. *See Sorrell v. IMS Health Inc.*, 564 U.S. 552, 557, 564-65 (2011) (noting that a Vermont statute banning the sale of certain pharmaceutical data effectively banned certain entities from speaking with physicians and pharmaceutical companies and was therefore subject to "heightened scrutiny"). For example, if a State enacted a statute banning the ownership of pens and paper, the statute would likely violate the First

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<sup>1</sup> We have referred to a type of protected speech as "speech inputs," *see Lichtenstein v. Hargett*, 83 F.4th 575, 585 (6th Cir. 2023), but it goes by different names in different jurisdictions. The Tenth Circuit, for example, has referred to it as "the protected creation of speech," *W. Watersheds Project v. Michael*, 869 F.3d 1189, 1195-96 (10th Cir. 2017), and the Supreme Court has referred to it as "[s]peech in aid of" protected speech, *Sorrell v. IMS Health Inc.*, 564 U.S. 552, 557 (2011).

<sup>2</sup> *United States v. O'Brien*, 391 U.S. 367 (1968).

## Appendix 50a

Amendment under the speech-inputs doctrine because it would restrict the ability to express thoughts through handwriting. Here, drone-obtained information may be analogous to pens and paper because it provides what the plaintiffs allege is a critical input needed for Drone Deer Recovery's speech to hunters. But the panel declined to apply *Sorrell*'s more rigorous level of review.

The panel's error may be understandable given the confused state of the speech-inputs doctrine following *Sorrell*. After all, that case is far from a model of clarity. The words "heightened scrutiny" have sometimes been considered synonymous with "intermediate scrutiny." *See, e.g., United States v. Skrametti*, 145 S. Ct. 1816, 1828-29 (2025). But *Sorrell* also tells us that the statute at issue in that case "enact[ed] content- and speaker-based restrictions on the sale, disclosure, and use of prescriber-identifying information." *Sorrell*, 564 U.S. at 563-64. Content-based speech restrictions are normally subject to strict scrutiny. *See, e.g., Free Speech Coal., Inc. v. Paxton*, 145 S. Ct. 2291, 2302 (2025). Meanwhile, *Sorrell* did not find the statute's content-based speech restriction to be dispositive and proceeds to apply *Central Hudson*'s commercial speech test, *Sorrell*, 564 U.S. at 571-72, which is an entirely different inquiry from strict or intermediate scrutiny, *see, e.g., 44 Liquormart, Inc. v. Rhode Island*, 517 U.S. 484, 495-500 (1996).

I am not alone in finding *Sorrell* to be unclear. Several commentators have noted that *Sorrell*'s precise standard of review is a mystery. *See, e.g., Samantha Rauer, Note and Comment, When the First Amendment and Public Health Collide: The Court's*

## Appendix 51a

*Increasingly Strict Constitutional Scrutiny of Health Regulations That Restrict Commercial Speech*, 38 Am. J.L. & Med. 690, 704 (2012) (“Based on these cases, it is unclear as to whether there truly is any distinction between the final prongs of *Central Hudson* and the strict scrutiny least-restrictive means requirement.”); Agatha M. Cole, Comment, *Internet Advertising After Sorrell v. IMS Health: A Discussion on Data Privacy & the First Amendment*, 30 Cardozo Arts & Ent. L.J. 283, 307-08 (2012) (“[I]t is unclear exactly how *Sorrell*’s ‘heightened scrutiny’ standard compares to the three generally recognized levels of scrutiny belonging to First Amendment jurisprudence (rational basis review, intermediate scrutiny, and strict scrutiny).”); Hunter B. Thomson, *Whither Central Hudson? Commercial Speech in the Wake of Sorrell v. IMS Health*, 47 Colum. J.L. & Soc. Probs. 171, 173 (2013) (referring to the “unclear implications of *Sorrell*”).

*Sorrell* is also unclear in the degree to which a speech input needs to be restricted before the doctrine comes into play. On the one hand, it seems like banning all pens and paper would easily violate the doctrine because that would outlaw the handwritten word. By contrast, a restriction on the use of a specific chemical in printer ink might not because printer ink still remains readily available. But *Sorrell* does not give us any direction on how to distinguish between the two types of regulation.

And, as a third point of confusion, the Supreme Court has never clarified how exclusively dedicated to creating speech the input must be before it receives some level of scrutiny under the First Amendment. When technology may be employed for purposes other

## Appendix 52a

than the generation of speech, those other uses perhaps may attenuate the level of protection for speech associated with use of the technology. Is a drone a speech input? Is a microchip inside the drone that is vital to its functioning?

*Sorrell* leaves more questions than answers, and the panel only added to the confusion. The panel determined that drones are not speech inputs, and then applied intermediate scrutiny anyway. *Yoder*, 146 F.4th at 528-30. But if the drones are not speech inputs, then it's unclear why any level of scrutiny would apply. See *Cornelius v. NAACP Legal Def & Educ. Fund, Inc.*, 473 U.S. 788, 797 (1985) (if the activity at issue is not protected by the First Amendment, a court "need go no further").

The panel seeks to distinguish this case from speech-inputs precedents because Drone Deer Recovery's speech is not political. *Yoder*, 146 F.4th at 528-29. But the alleged wrong from prohibiting drone usage does not depend on whether the speech is political. Rather, the constitutional violation from banning a speech input arises when the restriction effectively abolishes the speech altogether. It is one thing to say that business-related speech, once expressed, may have less First Amendment protection than political speech; it is quite another thing to deprive the speaker of the means for expressing its speech in the first place.

The panel said that the speech-inputs doctrine applies only to core political speech because our opinion in *Lichtenstein v. Hargett*, 83 F.4th 575 (6th Cir. 2023), primarily discussed cases involving core political speech. See *Yoder*, 146 F.4th at 528-29; see generally *Lichtenstein*, 83 F.4th at 584-88. But

## Appendix 53a

*Lichtenstein* does not limit its reasoning to core political speech, and the Supreme Court’s reasoning in *Sorrell* casts doubt on the panel’s attempt to impose such a limitation on the speech-inputs doctrine.

In *Sorrell*, the Supreme Court held that a Vermont statute “restrict[ing] the sale, disclosure, and use of pharmacy records that reveal the prescribing practices of individual doctors” was unconstitutional because it “imposed a restriction on access to information” that could be used “in aid of pharmaceutical marketing”—i.e., it limited access to a critical speech input for pharmaceutical marketing. 564 U.S. at 557, 568. That case involved a statute completely divorced from politics, yet the Court still applied the speech-inputs doctrine. And in fact, the central authority for *Lichtenstein* came from the Court’s striking down the commercial speech restriction in *Sorrell*. So the panel was mistaken to the extent that it sought to distinguish *Sorrell* based on the non-political nature of Drone Deer Recovery’s speech.<sup>3</sup>

The panel also attempted to distinguish *Sorrell* because the law in that case was not content neutral, given that the *Sorrell* statute allowed prescribing information to be used for some purposes but not

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<sup>3</sup> As an aside, I struggle to see how the panel’s distinction between political speech and non-political speech would matter here, given that the drone statute seems to regulate political speech as well. The drone statute would appear to apply equally to political speech. For example, the law would also foil the speech of animal rights activists who want to track down felled game and use it to protest animal cruelty—a quintessential form of political speech. See, e.g., *Animal Legal Def. Fund v. Wasden*, 878 F.3d 1184 (9th Cir. 2018) (political speech case involving an animal rights group that surreptitiously recorded a dairy farmer to expose abusive practices).

## Appendix 54a

others. But the drone statute similarly restricts a speech input based on the content of its use. The law forbids employing drones to obtain and deliver the location of felled game. But the law allows drones to deliver any other kind of information. For example, the statute apparently does not prohibit using drones to obtain and deliver data about the number and types of trees, the location of trails, etc. The drone statute thus regulates the speech input based on the content of speech for which the information will be employed. This is a content-based regulation much like in *Sorrell*.

We thus must apply *Sorrell* to this case. But what is the standard that *Sorrell* requires us to apply? I believe, based on the speech-inputs doctrine, it may be a higher level of review than the panel applied.

The panel's rejection of the speech-inputs doctrine may portend a split between our circuit and the Fourth and Ninth Circuits. In an opinion that came down after the plaintiffs petitioned for rehearing en banc, the Ninth Circuit concluded that an ordinance banning observing sideshows (a form of reckless driving in an intersection) was unconstitutional because it inhibits "the process of creating a form of pure speech." *Garcia v. Cnty. of Alameda*, No. 24-6814, 2025 WL 2536693, at \*4 (9th Cir. Sept. 4, 2025). The court explained that, even though observing a sideshow might be a restriction on conduct, it was entitled to First Amendment protection because it regulated "a predicate for . . . recording of those events," meaning that it essentially outlawed a

## Appendix 55a

speech-input. *Id.* at \*5.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the Fourth Circuit has held that a statute banning organizations from planting moles (i.e., undercover spies) in farms and slaughterhouses bans a speech input because it “prevents an undercover employee from publishing a critical article based on any notes she takes of documents or policies laid out in a breakroom.” *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Inc. v. N. Carolina Farm Bureau Fed’n, Inc.*, 60 F.4th 815, 828 (4th Cir.), *cert. denied*, 144 S. Ct. 325 (2023), and *cert. denied sub nom. Stein v. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Inc.*, 144 S. Ct. 326 (2023) (*PETA*).

The statutes in *Garcia* and *PETA* are a bit afield of the facts of this case, but the panel’s reasoning may be difficult to square with those cases. If observing employees in a slaughterhouse or watching reckless drivers in an intersection are speech inputs governed by *Sorrell*, then it would appear that observing animals via a drone would also be such a speech input. To be sure, the panel might say *PETA* involved political speech because the plaintiff was an animal rights advocacy group. *See* 60 F.4th at 820. But the plaintiff in *Garcia* was a transportation reporter, and there is no indication from that case that he was engaged in political speech. *See* 2025 WL 2536693, at \*2.

If this case began and ended as a hunting-with-drones precedent, it perhaps would not be worth delving so deeply into the panel’s rationale for its

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<sup>4</sup> The Supreme Court has held that newsgathering is protected under the First Amendment. *See Branzburg v. Hayes*, 408 U.S. 665, 681 (1972).

## Appendix 56a

decision. But I worry that the panel's opinion may be interpreted to diminish First Amendment protection more broadly, including for academics and journalists.

Consider how the panel's reasoning could be employed to diminish academic freedom. Many academic studies rely on recorded interviews. *See, e.g.*, Clark D. Cunningham, *Evaluating Effective Lawyer-Client Communication: An International Project Moving from Research to Reform*, 67 *Fordham L. Rev.* 1959, 1966 (1999). A State could theoretically enact a statute banning the recording of interviews between a healthcare provider and a patient. This prohibition would make it unlawful, for example, to use recorded interviews in a study examining whether psychologists can convince children to remember traumatic events that did not happen. Such a study could radically change the way we consider witness testimony in many criminal trials. And yet, employing reasoning similar to the panel's rationale here, a State's transparent attempt to stifle that research could be subject to mere *O'Brien* intermediate scrutiny because (1) a psychology paper is not political speech, and (2) the statute only restricts employment of a particular technology (a recording device) that can be analogized to the drone usage in this case.

The potential effects of the panel's reasoning could be similarly problematic for journalists. Consider a statute that bans audio or video recorded interviews *altogether*. If a journalist wanted to document, for example, eyewitness accounts of athletes who gambled on their own games, this statute would effectively ban that form of journalism that relates to a non-political topic. *See, e.g.*, Ronald Blum, *MLB Investigating Gambling, Theft Allegations Involving*

## Appendix 57a

*Shohei Ohtani and Interpreter Ippei Mizuhara*, Associated Press (Mar. 22, 2024), <https://apnews.com/article/ohtani-mizuhari-mlb-784e2301d1259c0828f7a3c7af9580f0> [<https://perma.cc/5C5W-5DMW>]. And yet, even though journalism (muckraking in particular) is one of the First Amendment’s central concerns, a statute restricting these journalists’ recordings would be subject only to *O’Brien* intermediate scrutiny simply because (1) the interview does not involve political speech and (2) the law did not ban the interview itself but only particular ways of recording the interview. Using the rationale advanced to defend the drone statute—that the drone statute only bans a particular technology to gather information but leaves in place traditional methods for tracking killed prey—one could argue that banning video and audio recordings of interviews is acceptable because the journalist can still use the traditional pen-and-paper method to memorialize those interviews.

These two hypotheticals cover academic research and journalism-areas that are supposed to receive the highest levels of First Amendment protection, even when they do not implicate political speech. *See, e.g., The Fla. Star v. B.J.F.*, 491 U.S. 524, 541 (1989) (applying strict scrutiny to statute limiting a journalist’s ability to publish the name of a sexual assault victim); *Keyishian v. Bd. of Regents of Univ. of State of N. Y.*, 385 U.S. 589, 603 (1967) (“Our Nation is deeply committed to safeguarding academic freedom, which is of transcendent value to all of us and not merely to the teachers concerned. That freedom is therefore a special concern of the First Amendment.”). And yet, under the panel’s reasoning,

Appendix 58a

they may receive only *O'Brien* intermediate scrutiny—with significant consequences, indeed.

That said, although I have concerns about the panel's opinion, I do not think that this case is a viable candidate for rehearing en banc. The panel's reasoning stems from a difficult-to-interpret Supreme Court opinion, and we are powerless to modify the directives from a controlling Supreme Court opinion in any way. *See, e.g., Mallory v. Norfolk S. Ry. Co.*, 600 U.S. 122, 136 (2023). So all that is left to do is wait for further guidance from the Supreme Court.

I cannot blame the panel opinion for its attempt to sort through confusing Supreme Court precedent. After all, *Sorrell* appears to call for *O'Brien* intermediate scrutiny, strict scrutiny, and *Central Hudson* scrutiny, all at the same time. *Sorrell*, 564 U.S. at 557, 563-04, 571-72. Thus, three people could theoretically argue in favor of each separate standard of review, and *Sorrell* would provide equally strong support for each position. But I am still concerned that the panel's reasoning in this case might cause problems down the road. Ultimately, I hope that the Supreme Court will give plenary consideration to this case or one like it to clarify the parameters of the speech-inputs doctrine.

ENTERED BY ORDER OF THE COURT

s/ Kelly L. Stephens  
Kelly L. Stephens, Clerk

Appendix 59a

**Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40104**

**Definitions**

(1) “Take” means to hunt with any weapon, dog, raptor, or other wild or domestic animal trained for that purpose; kill; chase; follow; harass; harm; pursue; shoot; rob; trap; capture; or collect animals, or to attempt to engage in such an activity.

(2) “Transport” means to carry or ship animals within this state or to points outside this state.

(3) “Trap” means taking or attempting to take animals by means of a trap or other device designed to kill or capture animals.

(4) “Vehicle” means every device in, upon, or by which any person or property is or may be transported, except devices exclusively moved by human power.

Appendix 60a

**Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c**

**Use of tranquilizer propelled from bow or  
firearm; use of unmanned vehicle or device;  
prohibitions.**

(1) A person other than the department shall not take game using a tranquilizer propelled from a bow or firearm.

(2) An individual shall not take game or fish using an unmanned vehicle or unmanned device that uses aerodynamic forces to achieve flight or using an unmanned vehicle or unmanned device that operates on the surface of water or underwater.

Appendix 61a

**Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40118**

**Violation as misdemeanor; penalty; additional penalties.**

(1) An individual who violates this part, an order or interim order issued under this part, or a condition of a permit issued under this part, except for a violation specified in subsections (2) to (19), is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment for not more than 90 days or a fine of not less than \$50.00 or more than \$500.00, or both, and the costs of prosecution. In addition, a permit issued by the department under this part must be revoked pursuant to the administrative procedures act of 1969, 1969 PA 306, MCL 24.201 to 24.328.

(2) An individual who violates a provision of this part or an order or interim order issued under this part regarding the possession or taking of any game, except deer, bear, wild turkey, wolf, waterfowl, moose, or elk, is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment for not more than 90 days or a fine of not less than \$100.00 or more than \$1,000.00, or both, and the costs of prosecution.

(3) Except as otherwise provided in this subsection or subsection (19), an individual who violates a provision of this part or an order or interim order issued under this part regarding the possession or taking of deer, bear, wild turkey, or wolf is guilty of a misdemeanor and may be imprisoned for not more than 90 days, shall be fined not less than \$200.00 or more than \$1,000.00, and shall be ordered to pay the costs of prosecution. An individual shall not be punished under this subsection for lawfully removing, capturing, or destroying a wolf under 2008 PA 290,

## Appendix 62a

MCL 324.95151 to 324.95155, or 2008 PA 318, MCL 324.95161 to 324.95167.

(4) An individual who violates a provision of this part or an order or interim order issued under this part regarding the possession or taking of elk is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment for not more than 180 days or a fine of not less than \$500.00 or more than \$2,000.00, or both, and the costs of prosecution.

(5) An individual who violates a provision of this part or an order or interim order issued under this part regarding the possession or taking of moose is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment for not more than 1 year and a fine of not less than \$1,000.00 or more than \$5,000.00, and the costs of prosecution.

(6) An individual who violates a provision of this part or an order or interim order issued under this part regarding the possession or taking of waterfowl is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment for not more than 90 days or a fine of not less than \$250.00 or more than \$500.00, or both, and the costs of prosecution. An individual who violates a provision of this part or an order or interim order issued under this part regarding the possession or taking of waterfowl a second or subsequent time is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment for not more than 90 days or a fine of \$500.00, or both, and the costs of prosecution.

(7) An individual sentenced under subsection (3), (14), or (15) shall not secure or possess a license of any kind to hunt during the remainder of the year in which convicted and the next 3 succeeding calendar years. An individual sentenced under subsection (11)

## Appendix 63a

shall not secure or possess a license to hunt during the remainder of the year in which convicted and the next succeeding calendar year, or longer in the discretion of the court.

(8) In addition to the penalties provided for violating this part or an order issued under this part, an individual convicted of the illegal killing, possessing, purchasing, or selling of a bear or an antlered white-tailed deer is subject to the following penalties:

(a) For a first offense, the individual shall not secure or possess a license of any kind to hunt for an additional 2 calendar years after the penalties imposed under subsection (7).

(b) For a second or subsequent offense, the individual shall not secure or possess a license of any kind to hunt for an additional 7 calendar years after the penalties imposed under subsection (7).

(9) In addition to the penalties provided for violating this part or an order issued under this part, an individual convicted of the illegal killing, possessing, purchasing, or selling of a wild turkey shall not secure or possess a license of any kind to hunt for an additional 2 calendar years after the penalties imposed under subsection (7).

(10) An individual sentenced under subsection (4) or (5) is subject to the following penalties:

(a) For a first offense, the individual shall not secure or possess a license of any kind to hunt for the remainder of the year in which convicted and the next 15 succeeding calendar years.

## Appendix 64a

(b) For a second offense, the individual shall not secure or possess a license of any kind to hunt for the remainder of that individual's life.

(11) An individual who violates section 40113(1) is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment for not more than 90 days or a fine of not less than \$100.00 or more than \$500.00, or both, and the costs of prosecution.

(12) An individual who violates section 40113(2) is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment for not more than 90 days or a fine of not less than \$50.00 or more than \$500.00, or both, and the costs of prosecution.

(13) An individual who violates section 40113(3) is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment for not more than 90 days or a fine of not less than \$100.00 or more than \$500.00, or both, and the costs of prosecution.

(14) An individual who violates a provision of this part or an order or interim order issued under this part regarding the taking or possession of an animal that has been designated by the department to be a protected animal, other than an animal that appears on a list prepared under section 36505, is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment for not more than 90 days or a fine of not less than \$100.00 or more than \$1,000.00, or both, and the costs of prosecution.

(15) An individual who buys or sells game or a protected animal in violation of this part or an order or interim order issued under this part is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment for not more than 90 days or a fine of not more than

## Appendix 65a

\$1,000.00, or both, for the first offense, and is guilty of a felony for each subsequent offense.

(16) An individual who willfully violates a provision of this part or an order or interim order issued under this part by using an illegally constructed snare or cable restraint is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment for not more than 90 days or a fine of \$1,000.00 for the first illegally constructed snare or cable restraint and \$250.00 for each subsequent illegally constructed snare or cable restraint, or both, and the costs of prosecution.

(17) An individual who violates a provision of this part or an order or interim order issued under this part regarding the importation of a cervid carcass or parts of a cervid carcass, other than hides, deboned meat, quarters or other parts of a cervid that do not have any part of the spinal column or head attached, finished taxidermy products, cleaned teeth, antlers, or antlers attached to a skullcap cleaned of brain and muscle tissue, from another state or province is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment for not more than 90 days or a fine of not less than \$500.00 or more than \$2,000.00, or both, and the costs of prosecution.

(18) If an individual is convicted of a violation of this part or an order or interim order issued under this part and it is alleged in the complaint and proved or admitted at trial or ascertained by the court after conviction that the individual had been previously convicted 2 times within the preceding 5 years for a violation of this part or an order or interim order issued under this part, the individual is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by imprisonment for not

## Appendix 66a

more than 180 days or a fine of not less than \$500.00 or more than \$2,000.00, or both, and the costs of prosecution.

(19) An individual who violates a provision of this part or an order or interim order issued under this part regarding any of the following is responsible for a state civil infraction and may be ordered to pay a civil fine of not more than \$150.00:

(a) Attaching that individual's name, driver license number, or sportcard number to a ground blind.

(b) Attaching that individual's name, driver license number, or sportcard number to a tree stand, scaffold, or raised platform.

(c) Supplemental feeding of deer.

(d) Reporting of a deer harvest or retention of a deer harvest confirmation number.

Appendix 67a

Case 1:23-cv-00796 ECF No. 23 Filed 02/02/24

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN  
SOUTHERN DIVISION**

MIKE YODER, DRONE  
DEER RECOVERY  
LLC, and JEREMY  
FUNKE,

Plaintiffs,

vs.

SCOTT BOWEN, in his  
official capacity as  
Director of the Michigan  
Department of Natural  
Resources,

Defendant.

Case No. 1:23-cv-00796

HON. PAUL  
MALONEY

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**AMENDED COMPLAINT**

**INTRODUCTION**

1. Mike Yoder is a lifelong hunter who developed a service to solve one of hunting's most frustrating problems—recovering a downed deer after it is mortally wounded and runs off. Mr. Yoder's Ohio company, Drone Deer Recovery LLC, finds deer

## Appendix 68a

carcasses using drones, which provide an efficient, effective, and minimally intrusive method for recovering lost game.

2. Mr. Yoder seeks to expand his company's operations into Michigan. However, officials at the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) assert that operating his business would violate state law. Specifically, the Department claims that using drones to locate downed deer would violate Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.4011c, which prohibits drone use to effectuate the "taking" of an animal.

3. DNR's interpretation of Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.4011c destroys a promising, innovative solution to deer carcass recovery and violates Plaintiffs' free speech rights as guaranteed by the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution. Plaintiffs bring this civil rights lawsuit to vindicate their constitutional rights.

### **JURISDICTION AND VENUE**

4. This action arises under the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution, 42 U.S.C. § 1983. This Court has jurisdiction over these federal claims under 28 U.S.C. § 1331 (federal question) and § 1343(a) (redress for deprivation of civil rights). Declaratory relief is authorized by the Declaratory Judgment Act, 28 U.S.C. §§ 2201–2202.

5. Venue is proper in this Court pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1391(b) because a substantial part of the events giving rise to the claim occurred or will occur in this District and Defendant resides in this District.

## Appendix 69a

### **PARTIES**

6. Plaintiff Mike Yoder is a United States citizen and resident of Dundee, Ohio. Mr. Yoder is the founder and Chief Operator of Drone Deer Recovery LLC (Drone Deer Recovery or DDR), a company that employs unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) to locate deer carcasses for hunters.

7. Drone Deer Recovery LLC is an Ohio limited liability company.

8. Plaintiff Jeremy Funke is a United States citizen and resident of Pinckney, Michigan, where he hunts deer and other game on both private and public land.

9. Defendant Scott Bowen is the Director of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. As Director, Mr. Bowen is empowered to enforce the laws of the State of Michigan regarding the taking of game. Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.1601. Mr. Bowen is sued in his official capacity.

### **FACTUAL ALLEGATIONS**

#### **Plaintiffs Mike Yoder, Drone Deer Recovery, and Jeremy Funke**

10. Mr. Yoder is a hunter, entrepreneur, and drone enthusiast. His company, Drone Deer Recovery, solves one of hunting's most frustrating problems: recovering a downed deer that has expired in a location unknown to the hunter. DDR utilizes drones—unmanned aerial vehicles—to find downed game.

11. Mr. Funke intends and plans to use DDR's services to help recover downed deer during hunting season when necessary, but for the fact that it is currently illegal.

## Appendix 70a

12. Through DDR's website, a hunter can contact DDR to find a pilot in their area to locate their lost deer. In Ohio, DDR employs three trained drone pilots, in addition to Mr. Yoder, to provide location services. DDR regularly receives requests for location services by hunters in Ohio, Michigan, and several other states, including Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Kansas, and Pennsylvania. Many of these requests specifically ask for Mr. Yoder.

13. Using a drone's infrared cameras and thermal imagery, DDR's drone pilots locate downed deer by searching for heat signatures. The pilot then switches to the drone's 200X zoom camera to identify the object giving off heat. If the deer is dead or the pilot believes it will be dead by the next morning, DDR's drones then create a "location pin" with the deer's location coordinates, and the pilot will relay that tag to the hunter.

14. DDR's drone service is non-intrusive—mostly operating at night, 400-feet in the sky—and often more effective and reliable than tracking dogs or trail cameras.

15. DDR's use of drones complies with applicable Federal Aviation Administration regulations.

16. In addition to providing location services for hunters like Plaintiff Jeremy Funke, DDR sells drones to interested pilots throughout the country. DDR trains these pilots in how to use the drones to locate downed game, with the intention that they will be able to establish their own location-service businesses.

17. Although Plaintiffs Mr. Yoder and DDR receive frequent requests for deer recovery services in Michigan, they reject them because they do not want

## Appendix 71a

to break the law. However, Plaintiffs are ready, willing, and able to operate in Michigan and would do so but for their fear that Defendant will enforce Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c against them.

### **Drone Deer Recovery and the Game Recovery Process**

18. After a deer is shot in a hunt, it often runs off and expires a significant distance from where the hunter encountered it. This is common, and deer are often lost in the dense Michigan forest.

19. Under such circumstances, the hunter must then locate the deer to collect it.

20. Michigan Wildlife Conservation Orders require hunters to make “reasonable attempts” to retrieve their game in order to prevent waste.

21. If a deer carcass is never recovered, the hunter will oftentimes, after a good faith effort to find the carcass, shoot another deer. Because hunters are normally allowed to “take” only a limited number of deer per season, failing to recover a downed deer leads to needless waste.

22. Hunters may use tracking dogs or other methods such as trail cameras to locate their shot game, but in many instances these methods are more environmentally intrusive and less effective at finding a downed deer.

23. Drone Deer Recovery’s services begin after a hunter shoots a deer and stows his weapons. The hunter logs on to Drone Deer Recovery’s website and enters their location to find a drone pilot near them. The website displays nearby pilots and their contact information, including independent pilots unaffiliated with DDR. If the hunter is in Ohio, they will have the

## Appendix 72a

option of contacting Mr. Yoder or one of DDR's pilots. The hunter then contacts the pilot of their choice.

24. If a hunter requests the assistance of Mr. Yoder or one of DDR's pilots, the pilot will request the hunter's location, approximate time the deer was shot, and any other information relevant to locating the deer. Once the DDR pilot receives this information and confirms his or her availability, the pilot travels to the hunter's location.

25. DDR does not participate in and is not responsible for transactions between independent pilots and their customers.

26. DDR's drones are equipped with a powerful long-zoom, infrared camera, thermal imaging technology, and lights that allow it to conduct its search nearly 400 feet above the ground in low light.

27. Once the drone reaches its operating height, the drone pilot scans the specified location for heat signatures. When the drone identifies a heat signature resembling a downed deer, it activates its camera and search lights to identify the signature.

28. When a downed deer is located, the pilot uses the drone to relay the deer's location coordinates to over a dozen Global Positioning System satellites, creating a location pin. This location pin contains the geo-location or location coordinates of the downed deer.

29. Once the location pin is created, the pilot disseminates the information to the hunter using Google Maps or a similar mapping service, but only if the deer is dead or if it appears the deer will be dead by the next morning.

## Appendix 73a

30. The drones used by DDR pilots are minimally intrusive to wildlife and hunters, making only ambient, nondescript noise. DDR's reliance on heat signatures to locate downed game allows pilots to perform recovery efforts at night when no other hunters are present.

### **DNR's Interpretation of Michigan's Drone Statute Renders Plaintiffs' Activities Illegal**

31. DNR officials have advised Drone Deer Recovery that it is unlawful under state law to use drones in any manner related to hunting. This includes locating a deer *after* it has been shot.

32. DNR actively enforces the ban on drones as articulated in the Drone Statute. For example, on or around January 11, 2023, a DNR enforcement official emailed Mike Cassells in response to an inquiry about using drones to locate downed deer. The email stated that using drones to locate downed deer in Michigan is illegal.

33. On or around March 1, 2023, another individual interested in using drone location, Daniel Schultz, asked DNR's Wildlife Division about the legality of using drones to locate downed deer in Michigan. The Wildlife Division replied that the use of drones related to locating wildlife in any manner is illegal.

34. DNR relies on Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c (Drone Statute) for its interpretation. That statute declares: "An individual shall not take game or fish using an unmanned vehicle or unmanned device that uses aerodynamic forces to achieve flight."

35. Under Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40104, "take" is defined as: "to hunt with any weapon, dog, raptor, or other wild or domestic animal trained for that

## Appendix 74a

purpose; kill; chase; follow; harass; harm; pursue; shoot; rob; trap; capture; or collect animals, or to attempt to engage in such an activity.”

36. A violation of the Drone Statute constitutes a misdemeanor. Punishment depends on the type of game taken. An individual who unlawfully takes a deer or elk, for example, faces up to 90 days in prison or a fine of up to \$1,000. Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40118.

37. DNR interprets “use” to include “locate.” Thus, when a drone locates an animal’s carcass after it has been downed by a hunter, the drone is being “used” to “collect” that animal, allegedly in violation of the Drone Statute. The collection of an animal’s carcass is defined as a taking under Michigan law. Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40104.

### CAUSE OF ACTION

#### **Violation of Plaintiffs’ First Amendment Right to Freedom of Speech (42 U.S.C. § 1983)**

38. Plaintiffs reallege and incorporate all preceding paragraphs.

39. An actual and substantial controversy exists between Plaintiffs and Defendant.

40. Drone Deer Recovery creates and disseminates information—the location pin for specific downed game—that does not exist until a hunter provides DDR with certain information and the DDR operator employs the drone to search.

41. DNR’s interpretation of Michigan’s Drone Statute is a content-based restriction on speech because it singles out a particular type of speech, namely location information pertaining to downed

## Appendix 75a

game, and prohibits its creation and dissemination if it will be used to collect the game.

42. DNR's interpretation of the Drone Statute against Plaintiffs serves no compelling government interest.

43. Even if DNR's interpretation of the Drone Statute advances a compelling government interest, the interpretation is not narrowly tailored to achieve that interest.

44. Because Defendant's agents or employees have recently explicitly articulated the DNR's position on the legality of DDR's business, Plaintiffs Yoder and DDR fear that if they operate within the state, they will be subject to enforcement action and its consequences. They have therefore rejected and will continue to reject requests to provide services in Michigan so long as such services remain illegal.

45. Likewise, Plaintiff Funke fears that if he receives communications regarding the location of a downed deer, he, too, will be in violation of the law. Thus, Funke has not requested drone recovery services in Michigan; however, he would do so if such services were legal.

46. As long as Defendant regards DDR's activity unlawful under the Drone Statute, Plaintiffs, who do not wish to violate the law, are chilled from exercising their First Amendment rights. Mr. Yoder and DDR are prohibited from operating their business in the state of Michigan.

47. Mr. Funke is prohibited from using drone recovery services such as DDR, which create and disseminate information to aid in the recovery of downed game for hunters like Mr. Funke.

## Appendix 76a

48. Plaintiffs have no adequate remedy at law to compensate for the loss of their fundamental First Amendment freedoms, and they will continue to suffer irreparable injury absent an injunction restraining Defendant's enforcement of the Drone Statute in a way that prohibits the creation and dissemination of certain information.

49. Accordingly, DNR's interpretation of Michigan's Drone Statute violates the First Amendment rights of Plaintiffs Yoder and Drone Deer Recovery.

50. Additionally, Plaintiff Funke has the right to receive information about a deer's location. However, DNR's interpretation of Michigan's Drone Statute forbids using location information from a drone to collect an animal's carcass under the threat of criminal penalty. Accordingly, DNR's interpretation of Michigan's Drone Statute violates Mr. Funke's First Amendment rights.

51. Plaintiffs are therefore entitled to declaratory and injunctive relief against continued enforcement and maintenance of Defendant's unconstitutional application of Michigan's Drone Statute.

### **RELIEF SOUGHT**

Wherefore, Plaintiffs respectfully request the Court enter judgment against Defendant as follows:

1. A declaration that the DNR's interpretation of Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c, as applied to Plaintiffs, violates the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution;

2. A permanent injunction restraining Defendant and Defendant's officers, agents, affiliates, servants, successors, employees, and all other persons in active

Appendix 77a

concert or participation with Defendant from enforcing Mich. Comp. Laws § 324.40111c against Plaintiffs in a manner that prevents the creation, dissemination, and receipt of certain information;

3. Judgment for Plaintiffs and against Defendant for the deprivation of their rights;

4. An award of Plaintiffs' costs and attorneys' fees under 42 U.S.C. § 1988; and

5. Any such further relief as the Court deems just and proper.

DATED: February 2, 2024

Respectfully submitted,  
DONNA G. MATIAS  
ANDREW QUINIO  
Pacific Legal Foundation

By /s/ Andrew Quinio  
ANDREW QUINIO CSB#288101

*Attorneys for Plaintiffs* MIKE  
YODER, DRONE DEER  
RECOVERY LLC, and JEREMY  
FUNKE

No. \_\_\_\_\_

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In The  
**Supreme Court of the United States**

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Mike Yoder, Drone Deer Recovery LLC, and Jeremy Funke,

*Petitioners,*

*v.*

Scott Bowen, in his official capacity as Director of the Michigan Department of  
Natural Resources,

*Respondent.*

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**On Petition for Writ of Certiorari to the  
U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit**

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**CERTIFICATE OF COMPLIANCE**

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As required by Supreme Court Rule 33.1(h), I certify that the PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI contains 3,692 words, excluding the parts of the document that are exempted by Supreme Court Rule 33.1(d).

I declare under penalty of perjury that the foregoing is true and correct.

Executed on February 2, 2026.

*s/ Andrew R. Quinio*

ANDREW R. QUINIO

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*Counsel for Petitioners*

**AFFIDAVIT OF SERVICE**

SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

No. \_\_\_\_

-----X

MIKE YODER, DRONE DEER RECOVERY LLC, AND JEREMY FUNKE,

*Petitioners,*

*v.*

SCOTT BOWEN, IN HIS OFFICIAL CAPACITY AS DIRECTOR OF THE MICHIGAN  
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES,

*Respondent,*

-----X

STATE OF NEW YORK            )

COUNTY OF NEW YORK        )

I, Ann Tosel, being duly sworn according to law and being over the age of 18, upon my oath depose and say that:

I am retained by Counsel of Record for *Petitioner*.

That on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of February, 2026, I served the within *Petition for a Writ of Certiorari* in the above-captioned matter upon:

Mr. Nathan A. Gambill  
Ms. Echo Aloe  
Office of the Attorney General  
of Michigan  
P.O. Box 30755  
Lansing, MI 48909  
(517) 335-7664  
GambillN@michigan.gov  
AloeE1@michigan.gov

by sending three copies of same, addressed to each individual respectively, through Priority Mail. An electronic version was also served by email to each individual.

That on the same date as above, I sent to this Court forty copies of the within *Petition for a Writ of Certiorari* and three hundred dollar filing fee check through the Overnight Next Day Federal Express, postage prepaid. In addition, the brief has been submitted through the Court's electronic filing system.

All parties required to be served have been served.

I declare under penalty of perjury that the foregoing is true and correct.

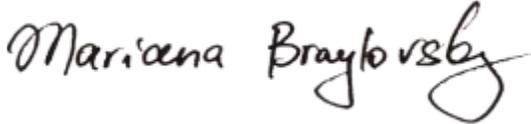
Executed on this 2<sup>nd</sup> day of February, 2026.



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Ann Tosel

Sworn to and subscribed before me  
this 2<sup>nd</sup> day of February, 2026.



**MARIANA BRAYLOVSKIY**  
Notary Public State of New York  
No. 01BR6004935  
Qualified in Richmond County  
Commission Expires March 30, 2026

