

**Karl R. Gebhardt, Executive Director, Ohio Lake Erie Commission**  
**House Bill 49 Testimony**  
**House Finance Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development and Natural Resources**  
**March 2, 2017**

Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development and Natural Resources, I'm Karl Gebhardt, Executive Director of the Ohio Lake Erie Commission. I am here today to provide testimony on HB 49, Governor Kasich's budget proposal specifically relating to the Ohio Lake Erie Commission.

The Lake Erie Commission was established for the purpose of preserving Lake Erie's natural resources, protecting the quality of its waters and ecosystem, and promoting economic development and tourism. Members of the Commission include the directors of Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, the Departments of Transportation, Health, Development Services, Agriculture, and Natural Resources, plus five additional public members appointed by the Governor. The commission currently maintains a staff of 2.75 FTE down from 5 FTE in SFY 15. The Commission moved its office last year to the ODNR Coastal Management building in Sandusky resulting in a savings of over \$10,000.00 per year.

The Commission is guided by the *Lake Erie Protection and Restoration Strategy*, which has identified twelve priority issues on which the member state agencies and other partners will focus their attention. The Lake Erie Commission has in the past primarily focused its efforts on the issuance and management of research grants pertaining to various environmental issues of Lake Erie and its tributaries. However, with the recent issues and challenges facing Lake Erie and changes to the Commission staff, we believe now is an opportune time to evaluate, and re-focus the mission of the Lake Erie Commission. We are committed to addressing these issues and challenges in the Lake and the role of the Lake Erie Commission in helping to address them.

The Lake Erie Commission can be an even more effective catalyst in helping Ohio meet its commitments under the binational Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement to reduce phosphorus in Lake Erie's Western Basin, expand efforts to identify and support programs to enable the beneficial use of dredged materials, address the threat of new invasive species, promote economic development and tourism with local governments and focus on applied research, programs and demonstration projects funded through the Lake Erie Protection Fund. The Commission is well suited to provide

better coordination of programs and funding between local, state, federal and even international partners on issues related to Lake Erie.

The Commission currently maintains two funds. First, the Lake Erie Protection Fund receives the proceeds of Lake Erie license plate sales, and uses these funds to awards grants for research, implementation and demonstration projects benefiting Lake Erie. Increased availability of specialty license plates has affected the Commission's plate sales and is, unfortunately, expected to continue its decline. Second, the Lake Erie Resources Fund receives Ohio's share of the interest earnings from the Great Lakes Protection Fund, an interstate trust fund established in 1989 to protect and restore the Great Lakes. These earnings, which can vary considerably due to market conditions, support the operation of the Commission and have historically not been used for grant projects. For the upcoming biennium, it is proposed to consolidate the two funds into the Lake Erie Protection Fund, aligning Ohio with all other states in the region in using the Great Lakes Protection funding for grant projects instead of operations. Additionally, it is proposed to transfer \$25,000 cash annually into the Lake Erie Protection Fund from each of the six Lake Erie Commission member agencies to support operations of the Commission. All financial activity for the Lake Erie Commission will occur in a single fund, allowing the Commission to leverage and maximize its resources most efficiently.

The Lake Erie Commission is committed maximizing resources in order to address the issues related to Lake Erie. We look forward to coordinating with state, federal, local and even international partners on to keep Lake Erie Ohio's highly valued natural resource.