



Ohio Environmental Council
[Action Fund]

**Proponent Testimony - Ohio House Bill 460 (Reps. Sheehy & Patterson)
Peter Bucher - Water Resources Director
February 13, 2018**

Good afternoon, Chairman Landis, Vice Chairwoman Hagan, Ranking Member O'Brien and members of the House Energy and Natural Resources Committee; My name is Peter Bucher and I am the Water Resources Director for the Ohio Environmental Council (OEC) Action Fund. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Ohio House Bill 460 today.

For years, our state has faced water quality issues in the Western Lake Erie Basin (WLEB). These issues manifest themselves in the form of harmful algal blooms (HABs) that are fueled by increased amounts of phosphorus entering the lake through the Maumee River. This excess phosphorus combined with shallow waters and warm temperatures provide the perfect setting for harmful algal blooms to form. These harmful algal blooms can not only cause threats to public health but they can drastically hurt Lake Erie economies by hindering recreation. Significant blooms have occurred nearly every year in recent history with the height of the problem coming in 2014 when Toledo was without safe drinking water due to the toxins the algal bloom produced. To fully eliminate the problem, our state must reduce the amount of phosphorus entering the Western Basin of Lake Erie by 40 percent by 2025. To accomplish this goal, the state and federal governments will need to utilize multiple tools targeting several sources of excessive nutrients.

Given that agriculture is the predominant industry in northwestern Ohio, I believe HB 460 can be an appropriate tool to continue reducing phosphorus that is coming off of the land and entering the Western Lake Erie Basin Watershed. HB 460 will establish an incentive for farmers and landowners to set aside portions of their property that borders a permanent body of water to establish a riparian buffer or "buffer strip". When constructed with the proper vegetation, buffer strips can drastically prevent nutrient runoff and sediments from entering neighboring bodies of water. Implementing buffer strips can help individuals and the watershed as a whole reduce the nutrients that are entering the Western Lake Erie Basin through runoff.

Individuals that pursue this program can work with local experts at their county Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) to design their riparian buffers. By enabling landowners to partner with their local conservation experts this will ensure that each riparian buffer is as effective as possible in absorbing nutrients based on local soils and vegetation. Although the tax exemption is only available for the Western Lake Erie Basin Watershed, assistance with the design of riparian buffers is available statewide.

For setting aside land to create riparian buffers, farmers and landowners in the Western Lake Erie Basin Watershed will receive a property tax exemption for the land enrolled in this program. This voluntary measure will not put any undue burden on our farmers in northwestern Ohio but rather it will empower them with cost effective means to mitigate any nutrient runoff their lands may be producing at no cost to the local taxing authority. Incentives such as this will need to be one of the many tools that Ohio implements to continue improving the water quality in Lake Erie to reach our phosphorus reduction goals.

There is no single solution to solving the problem of harmful algal blooms. Both state and local governments will need a multifaceted approach to improve Lake Erie water quality. I believe this legislation can be one of many such approaches toward making Lake Erie healthier. Although progress has been made in other areas of nutrient runoff, we cannot rest on past successes. To solve this problem we must constantly look for smarter ways to get best management practices implemented in a way that does not hinder our agricultural industry such as HB 460.

Chairman Landis, I thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 460 and I am happy to answer any questions at this time.