

PROPONENT TESTIMONY ON HOUSE BILL 460
Before the House Committee on Energy & Natural Resources
February 13, 2018

Good afternoon Chairman Landis, Vice Chair Hagan and Ranking Member O'Brien. My name is Bill Stanley and I am the Assistant Director for the state chapter of The Nature Conservancy. We are the world's largest conservation organization with chapters in all 50 states and over 34 counties world-wide. We are a non-partisan, science-based organization that seeks to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. Established in Ohio in 1959, we work collaboratively with businesses, farmers, sportsmen groups, government and local communities to develop pragmatic, market-based solutions to conservation challenges. More than 55,000 Ohioans are supporters of The Nature Conservancy.

We are writing to support the concepts proposed in House Bill 460, co-sponsored by Representative's Patterson and Sheehy. Encouraging conservation efforts on agricultural lands in the Western Lake Erie basin through positive incentives is a critical part of the approach to improving water quality in Lake Erie. The Nature Conservancy has helped to move forward voluntary approaches such as the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification program, a program developed in collaboration with leadership from the agricultural industry, specifically with fertilizer companies and advisors, and with researchers and government representatives. We know that most our state's farmers are committed to responsible stewardship of their land and adjacent waterways to help conserve and protect our natural resources. This 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification program, which is now statewide and touching down on almost 3 million acres, was designed to provide consistent guidance, and offers a way of identifying and acknowledging these good actors.

While encouraging and recognizing better in-field nutrient management is extremely important, recently published research conducted by scientists from The Nature Conservancy, Ohio State, and the US Department of Agriculture suggest that it will take a whole suite of practices to achieve the measurable improvements in water quality that our state seeks. In addition to sound in-field nutrient management, we encourage farmers all over the state to put in place

riparian buffers, including grass buffer strips, and other conservation practices to help reduce and filter out phosphorus and nitrogen runoff, which feed harmful algal blooms and dead zones. Unfortunately, to do this, land must be taken out of production and the farmer faces the costs. Measures such as the proposed tax exemption in HB 460 will reduce the financial impact on the farmer. And because the local environment will also improve, and the lost revenue to the local taxing units, including school districts, is reimbursed, this would be a win for the counties and local communities where the projects occur.

It will take a combination of regulations and additional voluntary measures to reduce the flow of agricultural nutrients into our streams, rivers and lakes and to achieve the state's commitment to a 40% reduction of nutrients into Lake Erie by 2025. As a part of this, research in Ohio and other midwestern states show that putting relatively small parts of a watershed back into natural cover in the right places will have an outsized influence on reducing nutrients. For example, putting just 1% of the Western Lake Erie Basin back into wetlands, in the best opportunity areas, could reduce nutrients by around 20%. Other benefits of this restoration would include providing local recreational opportunities and habitat creation, and reduced flooding downstream.

Our testimony is narrowly focused on the benefits that land management practices such as installing and maintaining riparian buffers provide to water quality and for that reason we are proponents of this bill. HB 460 represents a tool in the tool box to reach our state's water goals. There are, however, questions and concerns with the additional requirements of county soil and water districts which are already severely strained due to lack of financial resources. We suggest working closely with the districts to determine a path forward that works for all parties.

As members of the House Committee on Energy and Natural Resources I know you are keenly aware of the importance of Lake Erie and all our state's waters to our citizens, visitors, wildlife, environment and economy. We support the provisions in HB 460 to benefit farmers and agricultural landowners who choose to do the right thing to protect our waterways. This, in turn, benefits all Ohioans and visitors who rely on clean, safe waterways for drinking water, food production, swimming, fishing and boating and other uses. We ask for continuing discussion with the soil and water districts and eventual consideration and favorable report of House Bill 360 from the House Energy and Natural Resources Committee to the full House.

Also as part of my testimony I have included a map that shows the locations in Ohio where best management practices such as wetlands and buffers may be most advantageous to reducing

nutrient flow. TNC has the scientific expertise to develop these kinds of resources to help the committee and the state of Ohio in strategic, science-based decision making.

Thank you, Chairman Landis and members of the House Energy and Natural Resources Committee. I appreciate your time and I am available for any questions you or the committee members may have. Thank you.