

**Testimony before the Ohio House of Representatives Finance Subcommittee
On Agriculture, Development and Natural Resources**

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Regarding
Fiscal Years 2020-2021 Biennium Budget
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Good morning Chairman Hoops, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Joy Mulinex, and I am the Executive Director of the Ohio Lake Erie Commission. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on behalf of the Lake Erie Commission.

The Commission is comprised of the directors of six state agencies including the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, and the Departments of Natural Resources, Transportation, Health, Agriculture, and Development Services. There are also five additional members appointed by the governor who serve 3-year terms. Additionally, the two board members of the Great Lakes Protection Fund Board serve as ex-officio, non-voting members of the Lake Erie Commission.

The mission of the Ohio Lake Erie Commission and its office is to protect and restore Lake Erie's natural resources, its waters and ecosystem and to promote economic development of the region. Restoring Lake Erie's water quality is one of Governor DeWine's top priorities, and the Lake Erie Commission looks forward to working with the state agencies on Lake Erie challenges including reducing the threat of toxic algal blooms from excess nutrients which is the largest challenge that Lake Erie is faces. We implement our mission through the coordination of policies and programs of state government pertaining to water quality, fish & wildlife, habitat protection, economic development, and other state actions impacting Lake Erie.

While the member agencies of the Commission have their own statutory authorities that affect Lake Erie, the Commission provides a forum for cross-program coordination to improve program effectiveness.

Our work falls into five main categories:

- 1) Awarding grants through the Lake Erie Protection Fund for projects that help implement the objectives of the Commission's *Lake Erie Protection & Restoration Plan*. The revenue for the Lake Erie Protection Fund comes from the proceeds of the sale of the Lake Erie license plates as well as donations and contributions. The grant program funds a wide range of projects for the benefit of Lake Erie.
- 2) Preparing and implementing the *Lake Erie Protection & Restoration Plan*. This report reflects the state of Ohio's priorities over the next several years to protect, preserve and restore our Great Lake as well as to promote economic development associated with Lake Erie. The purpose of this plan is to identify the state's strategic direction for Lake Erie and the Lake Erie Watershed. Additionally, these reports have provided a useful framework for securing federal funding to implement Lake Erie projects.
- 3) Advancing projects to utilize dredge material. Ohio will prohibit the practice of open lake disposal of dredge material next summer. In anticipation of this deadline, we have been proactively working with communities along the shore to identify projects that can utilize the clean dredge material removed from navigation channels. To ensure that the Army Corps of Engineers can continue to keep our navigation channels open so that the Ohio businesses that rely on Lake Erie shipping continue operations, the Commission must continually advance these projects through the pipeline.
- 4) Marketing and education. A 2017 study by Oxford Economics reported that for the eight counties bordering Lake Erie in Ohio, total tourism-related spending was \$15.1 billion. As impressive as this figure is, we want to see that figure go up. The Commission is tasked with increasing the awareness of Ohioans of the benefits and concerns of Lake Erie. The Commission's "Life on Lake Erie" Photo Contest is an example of how we can help market one of Ohio's great natural resources.
- 5) Coordinating state efforts on Lake Erie. Lake Erie is governed by multiple international agreements, federal and state laws and local policies. Whether the goal is water quality,

fishery habitat, or tourism, there is typically overlap between state agencies' programs. The Lake Erie Commission works with state agencies to coordinate state efforts and to speak with a unified voice on Lake Erie issues such as the harmful algal bloom threat and contaminated sediment cleanup. As part of our coordinating responsibilities, we represent the State of Ohio on various boards of regional and international Great Lakes management organizations. We track federal Great Lakes funding coming to Ohio to improve coordination of Lake Erie programs and priorities with federal, state and local entities. We also use our quarterly Commission meetings to provide a forum for the public to learn about Lake Erie activities being undertaken by the Commission and partner agencies, voice concerns and be involved in Lake Erie policy making.

The Commission's budget is primarily dedicated to personnel costs. The Commission's employees are located throughout the state. In addition to me, there is a full-time position located in the Department of Natural Resources' Office of Coastal Management in Sandusky. One part-time position works in Ohio EPA's Northwest District Office, and one full-time position, shared with Ohio EPA, is located in Ohio EPA's Northeast District Office. For the FY 2020-2021 biennium, the Commission's proposed budget includes the full cost of the Executive Director position which had previously been shared with Ohio EPA.

Lake Erie is a natural resource treasure for Ohio, providing drinking water for nearly 3 million Ohioans. Because everyone deserves safe and clean water, Lake Erie should be protected and restored for future generations. Thank you for your consideration of our budget request, and I welcome any questions you may have.