



OEC [Action Fund]

**Interested Party Testimony of Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund
State Biennial Operating Budget - House Bill 166 (As Introduced)
Presented to the Ohio House Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and
Natural Resources
April 3, 2019**

Chairman Hoops, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and Members of the Ohio House Finance Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources, thank for the opportunity to testify before this committee today on the Governor's proposed budget for Fiscal Years 2020-2021, introduced as House Bill (HB) 166. My name is Peter Bucher and I'm the Water Resources Director for the Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund (OECAF).

While this subcommittee has a broad and varied jurisdiction, my remarks today focus on the activities of the Ohio Department of Agriculture and the proposed H2Ohio fund.

The Ohio Department of Agriculture plays a crucial role in supporting Ohio's agricultural industry but it also plays a crucial role in protecting Ohio's waterways as well. No waterway is as entwined in this work than our Great Lake, Lake Erie. Lake Erie is a source of drinking water for nearly 3 million Ohioans and an economic engine for our state. The Ohio tourism industry is a \$40 billion plus industry in Ohio with more than a third of that revenue being generated by 8 counties along Lake Erie which supports more than 120,000 jobs. Unfortunately the health of Lake Erie, its residents, and these economic benefits are at risk do to the chronic harmful algal blooms we see every year.

In 2018, the Ohio EPA (OEPA) highlighted the severity of the harmful algal bloom problem by designating the open waters of western Lake Erie as impaired for algae in its most recent [water quality report](#). Additionally, the OEPA published another report breaking down [nutrient contributions](#) in major Ohio waterways highlighting how to address this problem in throughout the state. Simply put, this problem is not going away, and we cannot ignore it.

In the Governor's proposed budget, HB 166, a few key provisions were included to assist ODA, and other stakeholders, in protecting Ohio waterways like Lake Erie that struggle with harmful algal blooms. The first is the [Soil and Water Phosphorus Program](#) that was created in 2018 in SB 299 titled "Clean Lake 2020". This program comprises the main portion of the water quality funds that were allocated in this bill to increase

agricultural conservation practices and decrease phosphorus from entering the western Lake Erie basin watershed and ultimately harmful algal blooms.

Currently, this fund is maintained at \$20 million for both FY 2020 and 2021 which will allow ODA to continue their new efforts to get these resources into northwest Ohio. These resources will fund cover crops, Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) acres, nutrient management plans, soil testing and equipment and structures that can reduce nutrient loss. Continuing this funding will ensure what ODA is able to continue these practices beyond the first year to provide the foundation for a watershed wide conservation approach. We encourage ODA to further develop this program to ensure dollars are spent in a way that prioritizes projects that will improve water quality and to follow up to ensure things are implemented that are being paid for.

The second large water quality program that will involve several agencies is Governor DeWine's proposed H2Ohio fund. The current proposal is to allocate general revenue fund surplus dollars in the amount of \$900 million into this new fund where they can be appropriated each budget for water quality improvement projects. The fund would focus on three areas starting with land based strategies such as nutrient management planning, subsurface placement of nutrients and riparian buffer zones between farm fields and waterways. The second area of focus would be on natural remedies to improving water quality like restoring wetlands. Third, these funds would support continued research and data collection to guide future nutrient management decisions and funding.

We urge to the committee to maintain both the Soil and Water Phosphorus program funding at \$20 million a year and the H2Ohio fund at \$900 million.

Through things like the U.S. domestic action plan, to reduce phosphorus in Lake Erie, Ohio has maintained an approach that agricultural conservation will be done on a voluntary basis. Ohio will not achieve our commitment of reducing phosphorus entering the lake by 40% by 2025 without substantial state funding like these proposals. Ohio needs to fund and implement a statewide conservation plan to keep nutrients and pollutants out of our waterways for all Ohioans that drink from, recreate on and make a living due to our incredible natural resources.

Chairman Hoops and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for considering our perspective and our recommendations. We look forward to working with the Committee during the upcoming weeks to craft a bill that protects Ohio's drinking water and preserves Ohio's natural treasures for future generations. I'd be happy to answer any questions at this time.