



Working together for Ohio farmers to advance agriculture and strengthen our communities.

**Finance Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources
H.B. 110 Interested Party Testimony
Jenna Reese, Director of State Policy
March 4, 2021**

Chairman Kick, Ranking Member O'Brien, and members of the Finance Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources, thank you for the opportunity to submit comments regarding H.B. 110, the Governor's budget proposal. Over the last eight years, Ohio farmers have suffered declining farm income, devastating crop damage, eroding markets and now the effects of a global pandemic. Rural communities are hanging on as their small businesses close, students attempt to learn from home and economic opportunities dry up. We would like to highlight our support for funding in the budget to help revitalize Ohio agriculture and our rural communities.

Reinvesting in Ohio Initiative

The COVID-19 pandemic has delivered an economic blow to many industries, but none so much as our hospitality and entertainment industries. The shutdown came at a high price to our bars and restaurants, and many of them will never recover. This is a crucial market for our farmers that largely dried up during an already challenging time. Small businesses such as restaurants and others who produce value-added agricultural products in our small communities need additional support to survive. It is incredibly important that these industries get some relief as the situation was completely out of their control that forced them to stop doing business. We support the \$450 million provided for this purpose and ask you to do the same.

Development of broadband infrastructure and increased access for high speed internet is a priority issue for Ohio Farm Bureau. Broadband is a necessity that much of rural Ohio does not have access to, which has hurt economic development, education, and public health historically and only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Our farmers rely on it for precision agriculture technology and information about their farms. As farmers are constantly being called upon to help solve Ohio's water quality issues, it is imperative for them to have the technology they need to utilize conservation practices.

The challenges of farming have been mounting for years, which has resulted in an opiate epidemic, high rates of suicide and depression in rural Ohio, and a strain on families and employers. High speed internet is critical for our members to be able to access mental health professionals expediently through the use of telehealth services. The lack of connectivity was never more evident than in this past year as students and teachers have been mostly online, with many struggling daily to upload assignments. We ask you to protect the \$290 million provided in this budget for broadband infrastructure expansion.



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Ohio Department of Agriculture

The challenges of 2020 also put a strain on Ohio's food supply system, particularly meat processing facilities. Livestock and poultry farmers have found that they cannot have their livestock processed in a timely manner due to limitations of local meat processing capacity and capable workforce in Ohio. This lack of capacity issue also affects the consumer base, as they are unable to get their locally produced meat and poultry cuts and other products. We would like the House to earmark economic development funds in the state budget for a meat processing facilities matching grant program, including new construction projects. Continued support of ODA's meat inspection program is also important for keeping our food supply safe and preventing bottlenecks in the supply chain. Livestock can only be processed with an inspector present, so if Ohio does not have adequate funding for inspection then our livestock producers will have difficulty reaching the market.

As you know, our Ohio State, independent and county fairs are extremely important to our members and communities. We would like to specifically lift up the urgent need for financial resources for the Ohio Exposition Commission, so they can bring back the personnel needed to move forward with a safe and successful Ohio State Fair. We ask this committee for \$2 million in additional funding so the Ohio Expo Commission can effectively operate.

In addition, it is important for ODA's general funding to reflect the myriad of duties they are required to perform. With fertilizer certifications, meat inspections, farmland preservation, food safety, livestock permitting, and many other responsibilities, it is imperative for the department to have the resources they need to perform these tasks to the degree of quality we have come to expect.

H2Ohio and Water Quality

Through the continued leadership of Gov. DeWine and the members of the General Assembly, the H2Ohio program has thrived amid the pandemic, which, as you know, is a crucial program to help our farmers keep the nutrients on their fields and out of our waterways. To help the Ohio Department of Agriculture and the administration make H2Ohio a success, the member organizations of the agriculture community, university researchers, soil and water districts, conservation, and environmental groups partnered and formed the Ohio Agricultural Conservation Initiative (OACI).

ODA and OACI worked together on farmer participation in the H2Ohio program, and through our joint efforts, nearly 2,000 farmers in the Western Lake Erie Basin have enrolled in H2Ohio and received funding. This translates to over forty percent of the cropland in the Maumee River Watershed, or one million acres, enrolled in the first year of H2Ohio. To receive funds for conservation practices after year one, farmers have to be certified in the OACI's farmer certification program. Through certification, farmers' nutrient conservation practices are



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evaluated and proposed practices are reviewed to ensure promised completion to obtain funding. These practices are data driven agricultural practices: nutrient management and soil testing; variable rate fertilization; subsurface phosphorous placement; manure incorporation; conservation crop rotation; cover crops; and drainage water management.

With the additional \$49.3 million per fiscal year provided in H.B. 110, H2Ohio will be able to extend to the remaining ten counties in the Western Lake Erie Basin; this will allow one million acres more of cropland to be enrolled in the program. Over the past 5 years there has been a steady downward trend in the flow weighted mean concentration of dissolved reactive phosphorus observed at the Waterville monitoring location. While we are optimistic that this trend will continue, it can only do so with the continuation of the technical and financial support provided to Ohio's farmers under Governor DeWine's H2Ohio Initiative. Continued support for the monitoring efforts of the National Center for Water Quality Research at Heidelberg University is also important for Ohio to be able to continue to document this positive downward trend.

The Ohio State University and Central State University provide an array of agricultural leadership and educational programming that is paramount for agriculture. Extension services provide youth all across the State of Ohio with the leadership development skills they need through the 4-H program, educate people about nutrition and healthy food choices, and help farmers meet certification requirements. Another invaluable service Extension provides is taking agriculture to the urban centers and cities leading to more locally grown, fresh food where there is less availability. For these services to continue flourishing, adequate funding is needed to ensure program cuts do not occur.

Research and development is also a crucial component of our thriving agriculture industry. The Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center (OARDC) and the Central State Agricultural Research and Development Center provide farmers with researched best management practices so that they can operate their farms with greater efficiency and precision along with conservation practices. Water quality is one of OFBF's priority issues and OARDC provides us with valuable information and data needed to respond to the algae issue in Lake Erie and runoff in Ohio's other waterways. Greater funding for these line items will ensure our state has the science-based research and development programs necessary to educate the population on agriculture and safe food practices.

Young and Beginning Farmers

The recent economic setbacks also make it more difficult for the next generation to get started in agriculture and to maintain the health and growth of our communities. The Ohio Beginning Farmer Tax Credit program would advance beginning farmers as they face significant challenges in the current economic environment. To ensure young agriculturalists are prepared to enter the



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industry and encourage the growth of agricultural education programs such as FFA, continued support of 5th Quarter funding as part of career-technical enhancements is needed.

Thank you for your time and consideration of the perspective of Ohio Farm Bureau members and your continued support of Ohio's agriculture and rural communities. I am happy to answer any questions.