

**Testimony before the Ohio Senate Committee
On Local Government and Elections**

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Ohio Lake Erie Commission

Regarding
Fiscal Years 2022-2023 Biennium Budget
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Good morning Chairwoman Gavarone, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Maharath, and members of this Committee. 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.

For background purposes, 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 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 continues to work with partner agencies to make improvements to Ohio's Great Lake. Lake Erie continues to be a draw for recreational tourism, serving as the Walleye Capital of the world. While Lake Erie is a tremendous natural resource, harmful algal blooms continues to be the largest issue facing Lake Erie. 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.

The Commission's member agencies have their own statutory authorities directing work on Lake Erie, and the Commission provides a forum for cross-program coordination to improve the effectiveness of state programs.

Specifically, our work can be categorized into the following:

Planning: By statute, the Commission is directed to prepare and implement the *Lake Erie Protection & Restoration Plan*. The Commission consults extensively with our state agencies so that the 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. This plan identifies 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.

Program Implementation: The Commission implements various Lake Erie programs, often in coordination with another state agency. Two programs worth noting are the Areas of Concern program and projects to implement Ohio's Domestic Action Plan to reduce nutrients.

Through a working partnership between the Commission, Ohio EPA, and local community members, Ohio has been making great progress on efforts to restore our Areas of Concern which are designated sites that do not meet the goals of the US-Canadian Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. Typically, AOCs were listed as such because of historic pollution that happened several decades ago, and cleanup at these sites was slow for several decades. Ohio's AOCs include the Maumee River, Black River, Cuyahoga River, and Ashtabula. As a result of deliberate planning for cleanup work as well as US EPA financial support, in the past two years, four of 27 Area of Concern (AOC) beneficial use impairments (BUIs) have been removed at our AOCs, and through the federal Great Lakes Restoration

initiative (GLRI), US EPA has agreed to spend almost \$17 million on AOC work here in Ohio. Most importantly, Ohio is closing in on delisting the Ashtabula River, one of our four AOC sites. Through the strong, federal-state-local partnership, almost 500,000 cubic yards of contaminated sediment containing 25,000 pounds of PCBs, low-level radioactive materials, heavy metals, and other pollutants, has been removed from the Ashtabula harbor.

For many years, the Commission has been engaged in Lake Erie nutrient reduction work because excess nutrients are the cause of the annual Harmful Algal Bloom that occurs every summer on Lake Erie. The Commission was then tasked with coordinating and helping to implement Ohio's Domestic Action Plan (DAP) which is a blueprint for reducing phosphorus loads into Lake Erie. While the problem with Harmful Algal Blooms is not going to be fixed quickly, the Commission is pleased that progress is being made towards a solution. Through the Commission's work with the other agencies engaged in H2Ohio, we recently released an estimate of the phosphorus load reduction that the 2021 H2Ohio projects will be responsible for, and while this is an estimate based on projects that are still being implemented, the load reduction estimate tells us that we are going in the right direction under our Domestic Action Plan. Also, as part of the Commission's nutrient reduction work as well as responsibilities for Governor DeWine's H2Ohio initiative, the Commission has requested a total of \$250,000 of H2Ohio funding to develop an H2Ohio Response Model. An H2Ohio Response Model would be a tool to evaluate work being done through H2Ohio to mitigate Harmful Algal Blooms.

Funding: The revenue for the Lake Erie Protection Fund comes from the proceeds of the sale of the Lake Erie license plates, interest from the Great Lakes Protection Fund, and donations. The Commission uses the Fund to award a small number of competitive grants for projects that help implement the objectives of the Commission's *Lake Erie Protection & Restoration Plan*. In the past two years, the Lake Erie Commission awarded seven grants for a total of over \$300,000, and since the creation of the Fund in 1993, 397 projects have been funded totaling \$12.63M.

Marketing and education: Lake Erie, like Ohio's other natural resources, continues to be a draw for tourists. A 2017 study reported that for the eight counties bordering Lake Erie in Ohio, total tourism-related spending was \$15.1 billion. Even with so many travelers to Lake Erie, there are people in the state who have never visited the lake or know much about Lake Erie. 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. Last year, there were 177 entries, one of the highest rates of participation in this contest for several years.

Coordination: 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 Ohio's 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 the Commission's responsibilities, it has lead the coordination of H2Ohio discussions, especially work focused on Lake Erie and is responsible for the annual reporting of H2Ohio expenditures. 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 employs 3.25 FTEs who are located throughout the state. The Commission does not have an actual office, and our employees work in OEPA's Bowling Green and Twinsburg facilities and ODNR's Sandusky office which allows the Commission to interact with our Lake Erie partners throughout the state.

In closing, many members of this Committee live near Lake Erie and represent shoreline communities so you already know that 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 the Governor's budget request for the Lake Erie Commission, and I welcome any questions you may have.