



Chairman Jones, Vice Chairman Klopfenstein, Ranking Member Brent, and members of the committee, thank you for accepting my testimony today in support of House Bill 568. My name is Milo Petruziello, and I am the Policy Director at the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA).

OEFFA is a sustainable agriculture organization that has served our community for more than 40 years. Our organization has more than 1900 members comprised of sustainable and organic farmers, gardeners, researchers, educators, food business leaders, and regular people who care deeply about the food they eat. The producers we work with operate very diverse operations in terms of both size and what they grow. We support these producers through education programs like our annual conference, farm tours and workshops across Ohio, direct technical assistance, and networking. We operate one of the oldest and largest USDA accredited organic certification agencies and certify 1100 organic farms in 12 states across the Midwest. And we advocate for state and federal policies that help farmers thrive in fair markets and access the land and resources they need to protect and promote the health of people, soil, animals, and the environment.

Since 2019, OEFFA has facilitated the Ohio Soil Health Initiative (or, OSHI), which includes representatives from organizations like the Ohio Farmers Union, American Farmland Trust, the Nature Conservancy, Ohio Environmental Council, Alliance for the Great Lakes, and Rural Action, as well as OSU soil scientists, educators, Soil and Water Conservation District staff, and most importantly—farmers themselves. OSHI came together because these diverse stakeholders shared a commitment to Ohio's soils and needed a space to share information and work together to advance state policies that encourage farmer adoption of good soil health practices. In addition to facilitating OSHI, we have held listening sessions with farmers asking what soil health best management practices they are using now, what they want to be doing, and what stands in their way. As diverse as our farmers are in their locations and production styles, all of them agree that healthy soil is essential to their success.

We all know agriculture is Ohio's number one industry and our farmers face considerable challenges as they adapt to more frequent extreme weather events like the recent drought and 2019's wet spring. Additionally, the cost and availability of fertilizers and pesticides are stressing farmers' bottom lines all over Ohio. Good soil health practices can improve water quality, help fields hold more water during droughts, improve infiltration during heavy rain events, help reduce input costs, and increase yields.

Ohio's farmers are already doing a lot of this work, but there are more who are interested in adopting good soil health practices, and those who are already on board, can use more help furthering their soil health journey. Essentially, they need systems and programs that are built for and by farmers. They want to learn from each other, and they want more technical and financial assistance to offset risk. This is why we need a task force that will take the time to listen to farmers of all types across Ohio and develop an action plan that works for them.

The Healthy Soils Task Force will be made up of 17 members, including farmers and representatives from environmental organizations, Ohio soil and water conservation districts, farm organizations, and sustainable agriculture organizations. Together they will work to:

- Identify achievable goals and timelines for soil health improvement in Ohio;
- Examine issues farmers face in accessing research, education, and technical assistance;
- Explore options for financial incentives to improve soil health;
- Research the contribution of livestock to soil health; and
- Consult with agencies and organizations like the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Ohio State University, and the Soil Health Institute.

This bill will support Ohio farmers and ranchers who want to increase farm productivity, profitability, and resiliency, and will have a positive impact on their community by improving the health of their soil. Many other states across the country have enacted or are working on soil health legislation and Ohio mustn't be left behind. States like Nebraska, Minnesota, Illinois, Colorado, Washington, and Utah have all passed soil health-related legislation over the past five years. As of February 2024, 26 states have passed legislation related to soil health. H2Ohio was an exciting first step but Ohio's farmers need broader support that centers on the soil in all its complexity and benefits, and helps farmers regardless of location, crop, scale, or production style. Now is the compliment that program's success with a comprehensive focus on soil for every farm in the state, and a task force is an excellent way to ensure we do so strategically and in concert with H2Ohio and other statewide institutions and resources.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of what is under our feet. Healthy soil is at the root of healthy water, food, economies, and communities. When taken care of, soil has the potential to store carbon and help mitigate the effects of severe weather events like drought, flooding, and high winds. Ohio faces significant challenges to water quality, and good soil health practices can not only help mitigate this problem but can also help farmers and ranchers with long-term profitability and resilience. Farmers are already having to adapt to more frequent extreme weather events and are interested in employing best soil health management practices that will help their land hold more water during droughts and allow for greater infiltration during heavy rains. Yet, even with all that relies on healthy soils, this natural resource is increasingly becoming lost or degraded. Ohio needs a comprehensive, farmer-driven plan to help our farmers continue improving their soil health practices so each successive generation enjoys richer soil and greater prosperity than the last.

OEFFA encourages you to support HB 568—a bill that would be a very focused, time-limited effort to hear from farmers and other stakeholders to identify needs, challenges and opportunities and to review the efforts of other states around the country to decide how we want to support farmers going forward. This bill can help set the trajectory for future Ohio soil health legislation. We owe it to our farmers to support them in conserving their greatest legacies: their soil.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my testimony. I am happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,



Milo Petruziello  
Policy Director