

Proponent Testimony – HB 683

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Good morning, Chair Edwards, Vice Chair LaRae, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, and thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of House Bill 683. I'm Chris Zoller, and I serve as the Interim Assistant Director of Agriculture and Natural Resources for Ohio State University Extension. Extension is the educational outreach arm of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences (CFAES) at The Ohio State University - serving Ohioans in all 88 counties through the delivery of science-based programming to better their lives, businesses, and communities.

In alignment with our land-grant tradition, the Ohio Revised Code Section 3335.38 required The Ohio State University Board of Trustees to “establish a farm financial management institute in OSU extension to train interested and qualified persons to assist farmers needing help with farm financial management problems.” The Ohio General Assembly codified and funded this mandate in 2021 through the creation of the CFAES Farm Financial Management and Policy Institute (FFMPI).

The proposed amendment to House Bill 683 would include an appropriation to help fund FFMPI over the next 5 years. This \$500,000 investment would help FFMPI continue to reach a broad range of audiences, including farmers, farm managers, financial lenders, agricultural teachers, agency personnel, and OSU faculty and extension educators who directly interact with agricultural producers and support the state's \$125 billion agricultural economy.

Since its inception, FFMPI has integrated, translated, and communicated CFAES's farm management and ag policy expertise that addresses critical farm management and policy issues affecting Ohioans. For instance, FFMPI created the Farm-On Course to better prepare Ohio's new and beginning farmers to profitably operate a commercial farm in Ohio. This 10-module online course was developed in response to Ohio House Bill 95's Beginning Farmer Tax Credit program. Since April 2023, 84 beginning farmers have enrolled and 27 have completed the coursework to be named Certified Ohio Beginning Farmers by the Ohio Department of Agriculture.

In an additional effort to improve financial management skillsets for farmers, FFMPI held Small Farm Management Colleges from December 2023 to April 2024, reaching 110 participants statewide. Post-course evaluation showed that 98.8% of participants planned to take action as a result of what they learned.

FFMPI continues to provide educational programming on estate and transition planning, income tax preparation, grain marketing, and legal issues unique to agriculture. Farmers and agribusinesses across Ohio rely heavily on the unbiased research and education provided by The Ohio State University and OSU Extension to guide them through these issues, and to maximize yields and farm profitability.

Current and emerging challenges to Ohio's agricultural industry cannot be overstated. From the current drought, to invasive species like the Spotted-Lanternfly, to the projected downturn in farm commodity prices, and the absence of a reauthorized Federal Farm Bill - these are challenges that FFMPI is well positioned to triage and effectively address through its expertise.

In both my role as the Tuscarawas County agriculture and natural resources educator and in my interim role, I am excited to see how Ohio agriculture will continue to benefit from the centralized synergy created by FFMPI, a responsive resource to the state of Ohio in meeting the ever-growing challenges in providing a sustainable and profitable agricultural system in our state. Our college remains deeply committed to the people of Ohio, and this investment by the General Assembly in FFMPI's efforts will provide a strong return to our agricultural and rural communities throughout the state.

We thank the General Assembly once again for continuing to invest in CFAES's mission to sustain life through its teaching, research, and extension.

Thank you, Chairman Edwards, and members of the committee for allowing me to speak on House Bill 683, and I'm happy to answer any questions.