



**Director Brian Baldrige, Ohio Department of Agriculture
Testimony for House Bill 683
House Finance Committee
November 20, 2024**

Chairman Edwards, Vice-Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer remarks on House Bill 683 today.

Ohio's agricultural sector is facing challenges that come with historic drought conditions. The impacts and challenges are real, and they are significant. Although we have cooler temperatures and have had some rain throughout the state recently, the impacts continue today, and they will persist.

Drought Impacts

Over the last several months, ODA has made it a priority to visit severely impacted areas, meeting with farmers, listening to their concerns, and offering guidance throughout this difficult time. With extreme drought conditions pasture growth on farms stops, limiting forage supplies which impacts how farmers feed their livestock. This year, farmers began to feed their winter hay supply during the summer months to ensure livestock health and productivity. As a result, farmers have faced challenging decisions to either purchase and transport additional hay and other feed sources or sell their livestock.

In addition to dry pastures, water sources on livestock operations have also gone dry. Farmers are supplementing livestock water supplies or hauling water daily to their animals from other locations. This unexpected setback is costing Ohio farmers time and money.

While Ohio has received some rain relief and cooler temperatures, pasture growth has been slow and recovery will take time. During the growing season, much of the state's pastureland was classified as being in poor or very poor condition. It is likely that forage and pasture growth and production will be impacted next year due to these drought conditions. Soil moisture recharge has begun but rivers and streams are still running low. Hauling water for operations has eased in some areas but is ongoing in the driest locations in southeast Ohio.

Federal Resources

Some Ohio farmers have access to federal programs to provide some compensation for grazing losses, emergency water for livestock and other supports. Crop insurance provides the first line of defense for farmers dealing with unexpected weather challenges; however, the use of crop insurance for pasture and hay loss is limited and not all farmers are insured. We are grateful for a strong partnership with the USDA Ohio Farm Service Agency, and we have worked closely with their team during the drought. With critical support and assistance from local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, we have been encouraging farmers to access federal drought programs that provide some assistance for these losses and additional costs.

However federal programs do not cover all losses and impacts. Additional state funding would help with recovery and assist with preparing Ohio's farmers to be more drought resilient in the future.

ODA and State Resources

As part of our outreach with farmers during the drought, we have been connecting them to existing resources and creating some new assistance tools. I am happy to have a chance to share some of those highlights with you today that include:

- Promoting Ohio State Extension farm management services to help producers deal with unique crop and feed/nutrition challenges and questions.
- Partnering with the Ohio Emergency Management Agency to convene a drought working group with state partners to assess lifeline impacts and identify tools to minimize impacts.
- Advocating and receiving approval for additional flexibility from USDA for haying and grazing acreage enrolled in conservation programs for Ohio's most impacted counties.
- Creating and promoting resources for farmers, including an online hay directory to identify hay for sale and water refilling stations at lakes and reservoirs in significant drought areas.

Finally, mental health continues to be a top priority with this drought. As farmers deal with significant challenges and unique stressors that are out of their control, we are encouraging them to check on one another, and to help make the right connections for those who need help.

ODA stands ready to implement state resources to help farmers recover from this drought and build resiliency. Local SWCD partners are trusted partners in the agriculture community, and they are critical to ensuring additional funding is directed to where it is needed most. ODA is committed to supporting the state's number one industry, food and agriculture.

Thank you, Chairman Edwards and Representative Jones, for your diligent work on this issue. I am happy to answer any questions.