

Ohio House of Representatives
Finance Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, & Natural Resources
Interested Party Testimony
Ohio House Bill 33

*Rebecca Mellino, The Nature Conservancy in Ohio
March 21, 2023*

Chairman Jones, Ranking Member Troy, and Honorable members of the Finance Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, & Natural Resources, I am Rebecca Mellino, Policy Associate for The Nature Conservancy in Ohio. We appreciate your consideration of our testimony for Ohio House Bill 33, Ohio's FY24-25 Main Operating Budget.

The Nature Conservancy is a global organization with chapters in all 50 states and projects in over 70 countries. We are a non-partisan, science-based organization that seeks to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. We work collaboratively with businesses, farmers, sportsmen groups, government, and local communities to develop pragmatic solutions to conservation challenges, including land conservation, water quality, and air pollution. We have been working in Ohio for over 70 years, and more than 65,000 Ohioans are Nature Conservancy supporters. We own and manage over 20,000 acres of nature preserves throughout the state. We invite any of you to visit our open preserves and enjoy the unique places that make Ohio a great place to live, work and play. We also invite you to visit our work with farmers in northwest Ohio to see first-hand how conservation and agriculture work together to address the problems in the western Lake Erie basin.

House Bill 33 continues and expands critical investments to protect Ohio's natural assets and resources. This recognition of the funding need for these essential resources will improve Ohio's water quality and enhance and preserve our natural resources. TNC commends the Ohio EPA, DNR, and Department of Agriculture for budget recommendations with an eye toward a healthier, more sustainable Ohio. Specifically, TNC appreciates the funding requests made for the following initiatives including, but not limited to:

- **H2Ohio Funding & Rivers Initiative:** TNC applauds the DeWine Administration for its continued efforts to improve drinking water and water infrastructure and support the overall health of Ohio's waterways. We support all three legs of H2Ohio and are especially appreciative of the support for natural solutions, such as wetland restoration, which creates lasting improvements to Ohio's water. As public, and private partners work towards a data-driven approach to restore and improve Ohio's rivers and river areas around the state, we applaud the increased investments in the H2Ohio program overall and the proposed development of the H2Ohio Rivers Initiative in particular.
- **Lake Erie Commission & The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative:** TNC commends Governor DeWine and his Administration's focus on restoring our Great Lakes. The Lake Erie Commission remains a critical entity focused on preserving Lake Erie's natural resources and broader ecosystems. To that end, the Commission's focus on combatting the Western Basin's harmful algal blooms should remain a top priority over the next biennium.

We look forward to the Commission's due diligence in crafting revised H2Ohio grant requirements to increase data accuracy and utilization. Additional federal funding will support nutrient reduction efforts in Lake Erie while providing communities with project grants for dam removal and dredging of

the Cuyahoga River. This funding will help further Lake Erie and Cuyahoga River restoration and stabilization measures with an additional \$14.2 million for restoration and improvement of all Ohio rivers and river areas across the state.

- **ODNR Buckeye State Tree Nursery:** TNC also supports the Ohio Department of Natural Resource's new Buckeye State Tree Nursery, which will assist in meeting the increasing demand for seedlings. This nursery will alleviate Ohio's dependency on other states for seedlings and with proper funding and development of the nursery, around one million bare root seedlings will be generated annually after the third year of implementation, enabling the expansion of Ohio's forests, wildlife habitats, and improved air and water quality. Furthermore, the Forestry program will provide first responders with the training and resources needed to manage and prevent destructive wildfires, increase invasive species control measures and double the number of service forester visits to landowners who assist private landowners with proper forest management.
- **ODNR Natural Areas & Preserves (DNAP):** TNC also recommends continued investment made by this Executive budget proposal to protect land and water across Ohio. The additional funding in House Bill 33 will add nearly 5,000 acres of new land, ten state nature preserves, and two scenic river designations over the biennium. Furthermore, DNAP investments will treat and control invasive species spanning 6,000 acres over the biennium while providing increased access with four new ADA trail installments.

Concerns/Recommendations

Notwithstanding TNC's appreciation for the substantial investments in our state's natural resources, we'd like to highlight a point of concern for the progress of Ohio's natural resource protection efforts. House Bill 33 authorizes the transfer of money from the Oil and Gas Well Fund to other uses at ODNR. We encourage investments for plugging orphaned wells to remain whole as this significant issue in Ohio will need long term support to be fully addressed. Sustainable funding beyond a Federal appropriation through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act is critical to address the 19,000+ orphaned wells currently identified by ODNR. Funding levels should remain consistent with the previous biennium, given the statewide demand for the efficient and effective use of these monies.

In conclusion, TNC in Ohio remains optimistic about House Bill 33 and the myriad of investments made to protect Ohio's natural resources. We urge support for the abovementioned initiatives and caution against removing necessary funding from in-demand initiatives such as the Oil and Gas Well Fund programs. TNC stands ready to assist our state agency partners and will continue to work diligently to make Ohio the best place to live, work, and raise a family. Thank you again for this opportunity to testify as an interested party to House Bill 33. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions or comments.

Respectfully Submitted,

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