

WITNESS INFORMATION FORM

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Legislation (Bill/Resolution Number): _____

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House Finance Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources

Prepared by Verdantas

Chair Jones, Ranking Member Troy, and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources, thank you for the opportunity to provide Interested Party Testimony regarding the state's Main Operating Budget for Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025.

My name is Jenny Carter-Cornell and I am a Senior Consultant – Funding Specialist for Verdantas. Verdantas is a full-service consulting company in the environmental, infrastructure, and energy industries with more than 850 employees. Hull & Associates, LLC became Verdantas in January 2022 and is now part of a company with hundreds of professionals primarily in the engineering and science fields. Hull was founded in Toledo in 1980 and our Great Lakes service area in Ohio has approximately 145 professionals in offices in Dublin, Toledo, Newark, Bedford (Cleveland area), and St. Clairsville. For more than 30 years, we have been leading experts in Ohio's brownfield program, directing hundreds of Ohio Voluntary Action Program projects since the program's inception and successfully completing 138 No Further Action letters, 125 (+ five pending) Covenants Not to Sue, and 34 (+ two pending/in process) approved Urban Setting Designations.

Brownfield Successes Over Past Two Years

Recognizing the challenge presented to Ohio by the presence of brownfields, the FY22-23 main operating budget established the Brownfield Remediation Fund (BRF), providing \$350 million to assess and cleanup these environmentally contaminated sites. We commend the Legislature for the inclusion of this program, and the Ohio Department of Development in its administration of this successful program.

The Brownfield Remediation Fund's \$350 million provided grants to 313 projects in 83 of Ohio's 88 counties. While this is a significant investment in the assessment and cleanup of brownfields, the need remains for grant dollars to remediate and redevelop these blighted brownfields into productive use.

Addressing the Ongoing Need for Revitalization

The as-introduced budget does not include funding for the Brownfield Remediation Fund, and therefore, **we are providing this testimony to encourage the committee to provide an additional \$350 million to this program in the FY24-25 budget.**

The initial investment of \$350 million was allocated to 188 cleanup grants, which is the final step in the remediation process to address environmental contamination and allow these brownfields to become new industrial and commercial sites, new housing, mixed-use space, or developable land.

We helped our public and private sector clients prepare 23 successful grants (13 remediation/10 assessments) securing over \$76 million through this program. These brownfields included old dumps, former auto plants and other manufacturing facilities, a chemical mixing plant, and an old port terminal facility. Many of these properties were vacant for years as community leaders and developers waited for the opportunity to secure funding to address these complicated sites. Most of these properties, in prime locations, will soon have thriving new uses that will provide significant investment, new jobs, and venues that will improve the quality of life for residents.

While many sites will be cleaned up through this program, 125 projects were only granted assessment dollars, which merely determines the contamination present on the site, but does not provide cleanup dollars to complete the work. Without additional funding, these 125 projects will likely remain contaminated, and unable to move into productive use to benefit the economy.

We believe strongly that each of the 10 grants we prepared for assessments will need to be remediated – most of these are not simple sites to address, and without additional funding, they will continue to languish and present health and safety risks to nearby residents and businesses.

An additional investment of \$350 million to this program will allow the 125 projects that received an assessment to compete for cleanup dollars. In addition to these 125 projects, the need for brownfield grant dollars remains. The final round for applications through ODOD opened and closed in less than three business days due to limited funding remaining and an overwhelming number of applications.

We can attest that the demand absolutely exists for another round of funding. In addition to our knowledge of many ideal properties through our day-to-day work, last spring and summer we turned down several potential applicants requesting our services to help prepare Round 3 submittals. Because their projects would not be ready for submittal on July 1, the first day of the Round 3 application period, we told them that it was not a wise investment of time and money for application preparation since we anticipated that the remaining funds in the program would be allocated quickly and likely that first day. This proved to be good advice, as one of our clients who submitted their application within the first 15 minutes of the portal opening on July 1 only received partial funding, as all remaining funds were spent on the applications submitted just minutes, maybe seconds, before that one.

We understand that the Greater Ohio Policy Center (GOPC) has worked with lawmakers to have a budget amendment drafted to add this funding into the budget. Verdantas encourages members of the House Finance Committee to include this in the budget. An investment in a brownfield grant program is an economic win for the state, and the communities where remediation occurs. Past research by GOPC shows that for every dollar the state invests, there is a five dollar return in private investment. Ohio's previous brownfield grant program contributed more than one billion dollars to the state's GDP during its tenure.

Conclusion

Chair Jones, Ranking Member Troy, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for your time and attention to this important issue. I welcome the opportunity to share additional information on our experiences with the recent program, our strong beliefs that an additional \$350 million toward brownfields would continue to be transformative, or how it would be ideal to eventually have a consistent and predictable funding stream to address brownfields throughout the state to address environmental conditions, remove redevelopment obstacles, and to draw additional investment by developers and end users.