



Chair Schaffer, Vice Chair Landis, and Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, thank you for accepting my testimony today in support of House Bill 162. 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 founded in 1979 by farmers who wanted to farm differently than what they were seeing around them. Our organization has more than 1,900 members and 6,500 supporters comprised of sustainable and organic farmers, gardeners, researchers, educators, food business leaders, and 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. They include farmers growing a half-acre of vegetables in an urban setting to those with thousands of acres of grain, and everything in between. We support these growers 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 1,100 organic farms in 12 states. 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. Whether one is concerned about farm profitability, water quality, water management, extreme weather events, or food system resilience, good soil health is key.

Despite the importance of soil health, many people do not understand just how vital it is to our environment, our agricultural productivity, or our own health. Soil is not just dirt; it is a living ecosystem of microbes, earthworms, and fungi forming the basis of life. It is a precious resource that should be valued by all, and the farmers that steward it should be celebrated and supported. This is why OEFFA and the Ohio Soil Health Initiative are proud to support HB 162 and its declaration of the second full week in November as Ohio Soil Health Week.

The second week in November is a special week because it overlaps with the birthday of the “Godfather of Soil Health” himself, Ohio farmer David Brandt who tragically passed away last year. Mr. Brandt is internationally recognized as a leader in soil health who educated and mentored countless farmers on

improving their soil. Celebrating Ohio Soil Health Week on his birthday honors his incredible contribution to Ohio agriculture and Ohio's unique contribution to the field of soil health all over the world.

Ohio Soil Health Week not only honors and celebrates Mr. Brandt and Ohio's farmers, but it is also an important opportunity for education. Mr. Brandt felt that farmer education was key and generously gave his time to teach others. Every farmer I know values their soil, but many of them still need help adopting good soil health practices, and even those who are already doing an excellent job can always learn more. Soil is incredibly complex and our understanding of it is constantly evolving. Having an entire week every year dedicated to soil health helps us promote the kind of learning that farmers most appreciate—farmer-to-farmer education—while shining a light on the latest techniques and science. Soil health focused field days are a great way for farmers to learn from each other and for the general public to learn more about Ohio's farmers and this precious natural resource that supports their own health and well-being. Ohio Soil Health Week gives us a platform to promote these opportunities far and wide, bringing in more farmers and community members.

This is why we hosted the first Ohio Soil Health Week in collaboration with OSHI partners this November 10-16th. I am happy to share that it was a rousing success. 25 different partners, including 11 farms, hosted 19 events in 10 Ohio Counties and online, and welcomed 724 attendees. These events provided opportunities for farmer-to-farmer learning, gardener and consumer education, speeches from policymakers, artistic expression, and fun. This was all through grassroots efforts. Many of the partners from this year's celebration were thrilled with the opportunity to play a role in honoring Ohio's soil and are excited about doing it again next year. An official designation by the State of Ohio would give us an even larger platform and greater legitimacy in the public imagination to grow the week and raise awareness of soil's vital role in our health, environment, and economy.

We ask that the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee pass HB 162 and formally declare the second full week in November Ohio Soil Health Week. Thank you for taking the time to consider my testimony and I am happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Milo Petruziello', written in a cursive style.

Milo Petruziello  
Policy Director