

Testimony before the Ohio Senate Finance Committee

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Regarding
H2Ohio
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Good morning Chairman Dolan, Vice Chairman Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Committee. I'm Joy Mulinex, Director of the Ohio Lake Erie Commission in the Office of the Governor. Thank you for inviting us to testify about Governor DeWine and Lt. Governor Jon Husted's H2Ohio initiative. Since 2019, there has been a strong cooperative effort among all of the agencies that have a role in the H2Ohio effort to improve Ohio's water quality and I help coordinate the cross-agency H2Ohio efforts.

Launched by Governor DeWine in 2019, H2Ohio is a comprehensive water quality initiative that is working to strategically address serious water issues that have been building in Ohio for decades. Such problems include harmful algal blooms on Lake Erie and inland lakes throughout the state caused by phosphorus runoff from farm fertilizer, failing drinking water, wastewater, and home sewage treatment systems due to aging infrastructure, and lead contamination from old water pipes and fixtures.

Thanks to the General Assembly's ongoing support, H2Ohio was first funded by an investment of \$172 million in the 2020-2021 biennium budget, and \$168 million of funding was included in the 2022-2023 biennium budget. This funding has allowed H2Ohio to begin the long-term process to reduce phosphorus runoff from farms through the use of proven, science-based nutrient management best practices and the creation of phosphorus-filtering wetlands. H2Ohio also passes funding on to local communities that need help paying for important water infrastructure upgrades and aids in the development of other innovative water quality solutions.

In implementing H2Ohio, we consider several different programmatic metrics to ensure that our H2Ohio programs are moving in the right direction.

In an effort to make H2Ohio transparent and accountable, the H2Ohio team is pleased to let you know about new publicly accessible, H2Ohio dashboards that were completed last fall. The dashboards show the most current metrics on the number of projects and enrollments, and this information can be broken down into counties or subwatersheds.

For many years, the Lake Erie Commission has been engaged in Lake Erie nutrient reduction work which has been a focus area for H2Ohio. Excess nutrients are the cause of the annual harmful algal bloom on Lake Erie. The sources of these nutrients are under multi-agency jurisdiction including agricultural and community sources. While the problem with harmful algal blooms is not going to be fixed quickly, the Commission is pleased that progress is being made. Our goal is a 40% phosphorus reduction in the annual load to the Western Lake Erie Basin. Through the Commission's work with our agency partners engaged in H2Ohio, we have released two annual estimates of the phosphorus load reductions that resulted from H2Ohio work. The results tell us whether we are headed in the right direction. Our baseline is about 2.5 million pounds each year which means that the reduction needed is about 1 million pounds each year. This calculator shows the completed 2022 projects. These calculations are our best estimates and not actual measurements.



Load Reduction for the Western Lake Erie Basin in Ohio – 2022 Based on completed work



With H2Ohio funding that the Commission received in the current biennium budget, we're nearing completion of another tool—an H2Ohio response model. The Commission is working with researchers at The Ohio State University and the University of Toledo who are improving their Soil and Water Assessment Tool (SWAT) model. The existing SWAT model for the Maumee River had already been created and enhanced from other funding sources, both state and federal. We are now asking the model, what is the expected response of the water in the river now that H2Ohio programs have been implemented? We want to know, at the watershed level, what is the effect of the program so far? And, looking to the future, what will it look like under 10 years of the program? This project is expected to be completed at the end of the summer, and we're anxious to get the results.

In the 2024-2025 budget proposal, the Commission hopes to continue work to provide greater transparency and accountability and is requesting \$260,000 of H2Ohio funding to refine and improve the calculations used for H2Ohio phosphorus load reductions, in part by better estimating baseline conditions for farm fields under traditional practices.

This work will also review national and state-supported research looking at reductions in phosphorus losses by implementation of conservation practices that are included in H2Ohio.

Again, thank you for your interest and support for improving water quality throughout Ohio. Though there is still work to be done to address Ohio's water challenges, I believe that H2Ohio is making great improvements across the state. H2Ohio addresses a variety of different water quality challenges, and it's exciting to see the impact that H2Ohio can have on communities once work is completed. Thank you, and I'm happy to answer any questions.