

**Ohio House Agriculture Committee
Interested Party Testimony
House Bill 96**

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Chairman Creech, Vice Chair Newman, Ranking Member Miller and members of the House Agriculture Committee. My name is Mary Turocy and I am the Director of Policy and Government Relations for the Nature Conservancy in Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony as an interested party on House Bill 96, the FY 2026-27 biennial 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 and water quality. More than 65,000 Ohioans are Nature Conservancy supporters and 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.

The Nature Conservancy would like to thank Governor DeWine for his continued support for significant funding to protect and preserve lands and waters across Ohio in his budget proposal. We support Governor DeWine's budget proposal for the critically important agencies that protect Ohio's lands and are working to improve our water quality, including the Ohio Department of Agriculture (ODA), and the Lake Erie Commission (LEC). The budget's continued investment in Ohio's farmers and agricultural sector supports the implementation of sustainable agricultural practices through programs like H2Ohio. We are excited to be a partner with the Administration, the General Assembly and other key stakeholders in the agricultural community to continue to preserve and improve Ohio's natural resources. In addition to our general support, we would like to call your attention to the benefits of a few specific items in the Introduced version of HB 96:

Robust funding for the H2Ohio water quality initiative

TNC enthusiastically supports the funding proposed for H2Ohio in this budget and celebrates the Governor and General Assembly's commitment to improving water quality across our state. Since the Toledo Water Crisis in 2014, when over 500,000 Ohioans could not drink their water because of a harmful algal bloom in Lake Erie, Ohioans have implored the state to take action to address water quality issues in the lake and across our state. The H2Ohio program, launched in 2019, is an innovative approach to improving our water resources and meeting our commitment to reducing the nutrients that run off into Lake Erie and cause harmful algal blooms. Through the efforts of ODA and over 3,200 Ohio farmers and producers, over 2.1 M acres of farmland across the Western Lake Erie Basin are enrolled in

at least one practice to reduce nutrient runoff to the Maumee River Watershed and Lake Erie. The Nature Conservancy works directly with farmers to support the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices, and we see the great benefit that these practices have on Ohio's waters and the health of agricultural land and soil.

The science shows that addressing issues like nutrient runoff that causes algal blooms in Lake Erie and improving water quality statewide requires sustained investment over time. HB 96 builds on these successes and provides \$260M for H2Ohio over the biennium to continue to improve water quality each year, including roughly \$60M for ODA in both FY 2026 and FY 2027. The budget also provides \$132,000 per year to the Lake Erie Commission to continue its important work in coordinating H2Ohio activities. These funds will be used to build on the successes of the Ohio Department of Agriculture in the following ways:

- ODA will continue to enroll farmers in its nutrient reduction programs and ensure that voluntary nutrient management practices are being implemented across the state, and particularly in the Western Lake Erie Basin, where nearly 1 in every 2 farmland acres are enrolled in an H2Ohio program.
- This budget recommends that funds for H2Ohio be used to support improved drainage approaches, like two-staged ditches, that will be used to reduce phosphorus runoff into Ohio's lakes, streams, and rivers, as well as support research to identify effective structure designs to improve our understanding of the impact that reductions in field water runoff has on water quality.

Support for Oversight of Livestock Facilities and Pesticide Misuse

TNC supports the Governor's proposal to provide funds to support the management of siting, construction, and oversight of large livestock facilities to ensure that Ohio's livestock are being raised in an environmentally healthy and responsible manner and that Ohio consumers can be confident in the sanitation and cleanliness of the products they are eating every day. Finally, we support the budget's highlighting the importance of investigating pesticide misuse and the dangers that pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers can pose to human and environmental health. Prioritizing the monitoring and licensing of the use of these products will ensure that all Ohioans can live in a clean, productive, and safe environment.

We urge your support for these recommendations and offer our help as we work together to make Ohio not just a great place to live, work, and raise a family, but a critical piece of our country's agricultural present and future. Thank you again for this opportunity to provide testimony as an interested party on HB 96. I would be glad to answer any questions.

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