

OHIO HOUSE CHILDREN AND HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

CHAIRWOMAN WHITE

FEBRUARY 27, 2025

Alex Buck, President, Fruit Growers Marketing Association

Chairwoman White, Vice Chairwoman Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the House Children and Human Services Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on House Bill 96. My name is Alex Buck and I serve as the President with Fruit Growers Marketing Association which is a cooperative of over 40 Ohio farms that grow apples, peaches, corn, tomatoes, and potatoes for the Ohio Foodbanks.

I am here today to share my experience with the Ohio Food Program a long time public/private partnership between Ohio's foodbank network, Ohio's agricultural community and the State of Ohio. Fruit Growers Marketing Association has participated in the program for 29 years and the relationship has been instrumental to our operations.

Our farms grow and distribute over 5 million pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables to the Ohio Foodbanks every year. This partnership ensures that the foodbanks have access to healthy and affordable food grown in their own communities. Having this partnership can give the farmer an opportunity to receive compensation for imperfect produce that may have a cosmetic flaw or may be too big/small for a retail chain.

Our farmers do not discriminate against whom they want to feed. We want to feed everyone in the community, not just those that can afford to shop at the big box retailers. Local farms in Ohio do not have a robust distribution system and are unable to service by ourselves the 3600 food pantries, churches, soup kitchens, and other hunger relief agencies so we rely on the 12 Ohio Feeding America foodbanks to supply them for us.

Supporting the state budget request not only helps those going through economic hardships but also helps the Ohio farmers.

The Ohio Food program allows foodbanks to purchase produce at an affordable price from the farms. Since March 2020, farming costs have increased by 40% on expenses like labor, crop insurance, fuel, raw materials, chemicals, and packaging. Budget cuts on the program will result in farmers leaving crops in fields and not harvesting if the returns do not offset the labor expenses. This will lead to less product for the foodbanks, less income for the local farms, and increase cost in products being sourced out of state and freight associated with procurement.

I am the husband of a loving and patient wife and father 2 wonderful children who are 9 and 8 years old. My hometown located in Stark County is Marlboro township where 48% of families live below the poverty line and are eligible for foodbank services. Almost half of my children's classmates struggle with food insecurities. Our family donates whatever we can to the community but its not enough and I know there are many other towns like ours all around Ohio. From a farmer and a family living in an economically stressed community we are asking for your help.

Chairwoman White and distinguished members of the House Children and Human Services Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify. On behalf of Fruit Growers Marketing Association, I am happy to answer any questions members may have at this time.