

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

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Chairman Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney and members of the House Finance 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 submit written testimony as an interested party on House Bill 96, the FY2026-27 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 supporters of The Nature Conservancy, 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 the Governor'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), the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR), the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Lake Erie Commission (LEC). The budget's continued investment in stewarding Ohio's natural resources and agricultural legacy will ensure our lands remain productive and beautiful for generations to come. We are excited to be a partner with the Administration, the General Assembly and other key stakeholders in the agricultural and natural resource management 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.

In addition to the agriculture work funded through this program, H2Ohio also supports important water resource management projects. Through the efforts of ODNR and partners like TNC, over 16,000 acres of wetland across the state have been created, restored, or enhanced with H2Ohio funding. These wetlands will filter water from more than 90,000 acres in the same watersheds. Not only will these wetlands filter nutrients from the water, acting as "nature's kidneys," but they provide a number of ancillary benefits to people and nature – from increased habitat for animals and opportunities for outdoor recreation for people, to combating emissions by pulling carbon dioxide from the air. In addition to the benefits for nature that the program provides, the budget provides funding to EPA to repair or replace failing home sewage treatment systems, replace lead service lines, and contribute to other infrastructure projects that impact the quality of Ohio's drinking water across the state.

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, \$46M for ODNR, and \$27M for EPA 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 H2Ohio Program 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.
- ODNR will continue to construct and rehabilitate wetlands, with help from organizations like TNC to identify and map key locations for effective wetland placement in the Western Lake Erie Basin and statewide.
- Both ODNR and EPA contribute to the H2Ohio Rivers Program, which protects riparian corridors, removes dams, treats acid mine drainage, monitors water quality, and removes trash and litter from Ohio's rivers. To date, the program has protected over 1,500 acres of high-quality riparian

corridor, surveyed over 150 high priority water quality sites, and removed over 450,000 pounds of trash from Ohio's rivers and streams. Continued funding for this program will ensure that Ohio's rivers remain safe for Ohioans to drink and recreate in and ecologically productive for wildlife habitats.

### **Robust funding for agency programs working to improve water quality outside of H2Ohio**

In concert with the efforts of ODNR and EPA specifically related to H2Ohio, these agencies also undertake other actions to support efforts to improve Ohio's water quality. For example, ODNR oversees the Healthy Lake Erie program, which recently funded efforts to use dredged material to benefit lakeside communities rather than dumping it in the lake, and EPA works to monitor and enforce limits on water pollution around the state. TNC supports robust funding for these agencies' efforts to improve water quality in this budget.

### **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 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.

### **Funding for miscellaneous programs**

TNC supports continued funding of the ODNR Buckeye State Tree Nursery established in 2024. This institution focuses on growing hardwood trees that have historically been native to Ohio including several species of oak, hickory, black walnut, sycamore, and American chestnut. These trees are critical for maintaining and preserving Ohio's forests and related forest products for generations to come, and to provide a steady supply of hardwood for Ohio's timber market. Because tree nurseries require significant capital and the native trees needed for reforestation are not as profitable as more commercial plants, the Buckeye State Tree Nursery helps meet reforestation demands, avoid out-of-state tree purchases, and keeps Ohio plants in Ohio, for Ohioans. In addition to the important work that the Tree Nursery is doing for Ohio's forests, we are happy to support the ODNR Division of Forestry's continued work with private landowners, incentivizing them develop long term land management plans assisting rural communities with wildfire defense and prevention projects, expanding reforestation, providing landowners with the tools to control invasive species and promote forest health, and ensuring that Ohio's state forests are safe for all visitors.

We also support and appreciate the Governor's prioritization of plugging orphaned gas and oil wells across the state. These wells are typically decades or centuries removed from drilling and production and have either been abandoned or have no owner. In 2024, ODNR plugged 538 wells, a 27.2 percent

increase over calendar year 2023. Continued funding for this program will ensure that the sites of these former wells can be restored to their natural state and won't pose a threat to public health and safety because of deteriorating infrastructure, methane and other gaseous emissions, or oil leaks.

Finally, TNC supports EPA's request to make its permits, licenses, and waste disposal fees permanent, like other agencies. Permanent fees ensure greater continuity for both EPA's funding and the regulated community. Making EPA's fees permanent while also eliminating or reducing the fees they've determined are not critical is a common-sense way to reduce burdens and ensure consistency.

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 shining example of excellent stewardship and natural resource management. Thank you again for this opportunity to provide written testimony as an interested party on HB 96. Please do not hesitate to reach out should you have any questions.

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