



Ohio Environmental Council [Action Fund]

Interested Party Testimony of Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund State Biennial Operating Budget - House Bill 96 March 13, 2025

Chairman Stewart, Vice-Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and Members of the Ohio House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before this committee today on House Bill 96 (HB 96) for the proposed operating budget for fiscal years 2026-2027. My name is Pete Bucher and I'm the Executive Director for the [Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund](#) (OEC AF). Our organization strives for a clean, healthy Ohio where all communities can thrive.

While this committee has a number of focus areas, my testimony will focus on support for the [H2Ohio program](#) which is Ohio's statewide water quality initiative designed to address the complex issues facing Ohio's waterways. From our Great Lake to the mighty Ohio River—and the many lakes, wetlands, and streams in between—Ohio's plentiful water resources provide drinking water, recreation opportunities, and a strong economy for millions of people.

Although Ohio is a water rich state, our waterways face a number of challenges such as perennial toxic algal blooms. While the most notable toxic algal blooms persist in western Lake Erie near Toledo, OH, these blooms cause serious issues in waterways across the state. They grow out of hand when there is too much phosphorus from agriculture, wastewater, and septic systems up-stream in our waterways. These overwhelming toxic algal blooms pose a public health threat to local drinking water supplies and local beaches and rivers all while hindering local economies that rely on clean water. The clearest path to keeping these toxic blooms at bay is to reduce the phosphorus entering a watershed which is what H2Ohio is striving to accomplish.

Ohio's drinking water also faces many challenges, including outdated water infrastructure and a legacy of lead in water service lines. The total estimated cost to catch up on Ohio's water infrastructure needs is approaching \$30 billion dollars over the next 20 years. These necessary improvements would reduce sewage from entering our waterways after severe rain events by phasing out combined sewer overflows, improve water treatment plants that clean drinking water, and remove and replace lead service water lines. [Ohio is third](#) in the nation for the number of **lead service lines, with an estimated 740,000 lines still in place that threaten the safety of Ohioans' drinking water.** Over the last four years, H2Ohio has been one critical way that our state is working to address a number of these water quality challenges.

HB 96 includes continued investment in the **H2Ohio program at \$132.8 million** for FY 26 with a slight increase in FY 27. Currently, the legislation would provide the Department of Agriculture (ODA) with \$60.6 million a year, the Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) with \$46.6 million a year, the Environmental Protection Agency (OEPA) with \$27.5 million a year, and the Ohio Lake Erie Commission (LEC) with \$132,000 a year. ***The OEC Action Fund is in full support of these much-needed investments.***

The ODA's primary role in the program is to help farmers implement best management practices (BMPs) to reduce soil erosion and phosphorus runoff. With this budget proposal, ODA will continue



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to expand off of the 3,200 producers that have been enrolled and the nearly 2.2 million acres of cropland in the program. Sustained, long term investments is the only way we'll see reductions in phosphorus loading in our waterways and to ultimately reduce toxic algal blooms. Continuing this funding over the next two fiscal years will play a critical role in doing that.

The ODNR has signaled that they will continue to expand their efforts to restore and enhance nutrient-filtering wetlands with 203 projects initiated or complete. Over its first two years, the ODNR Rivers Initiative has cleaned up nearly 200 linear miles of river in one year and removed hundreds of thousands of pounds of trash from these waterways.

The OEPA's primary H2Ohio focus will be continuing to fund water infrastructure improvements across Ohio; improving community drinking water and wastewater infrastructure, replacing failing home sewage treatment systems, and replacing lead service lines. Looking forward, the agency will improve water and sewer systems for 20,000 homes and businesses in 30 communities across the state. The OEPA will contribute ions to the Rivers Initiative will remove six additional dams to eliminate sediment and pollutants and to improve water quality.

Rounding out the H2Ohio budget is the Ohio Lake Erie Commission (LEC) with funding at \$132,000. Since the beginning of the H2Ohio program, the Commission has organized over 260 meetings among state agencies to ensure communication, coordination and transparency. The commission staff have also updated their methodology for nutrient reduction calculation based on new science. Moving forward, the commission will continue to coordinate multi-agency meetings and will schedule at least two public meetings to discuss the initiative.

We urge the committee to maintain the proposed H2Ohio funding at \$269.8 million over the next two fiscal years for the whole program and the ODA specific H2Ohio funding at \$60.6 million per year.

In addition to supporting the H2Ohio funding levels, we would echo the Ohio EPA's call to permanently extend the various fees that they utilize to fund critical programs. These represent the agency's primary revenue source, making up approximately 70% of the budget that is before you. These fees support critical environmental remediation work such as their wastewater permitting, scrap tire program, water system licensing, and operator certification. Permanently extending these fees will better align with similar fee structures at other state agencies and it will ensure sustainable funding for the Ohio EPA beyond the Biennium.

Chairman Stewart, Vice-Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and Members of the Ohio House Finance Committee, thank you for considering our perspective on HB 96. Please reach out if you have any questions at this time.

Thank you,
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