



*Working together for Ohio farmers to advance
agriculture and strengthen our communities.*

**House Finance Committee
House Bill 96 Interested Party Testimony
Evan Callicoat, Director of State Policy
April 3rd, 2025**

Chairman Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and other members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit comments regarding HB 96. The 2026-2027 Operating Budget includes many opportunities to help agriculture in Ohio continue to be the economic driver it is today. We would like to highlight our support for a few different provisions in the budget that promote Ohio agriculture and strengthen our rural communities.

H2Ohio:

Since 2019, with the leadership of Gov. DeWine and the General Assembly, the H2Ohio program has played a crucial role in retaining nutrients on fields that provide farmers additional tools to be stewards of Ohio's waterways. To encourage participation amongst multiple groups in H2Ohio, the agricultural community, university researchers, soil and water districts, and conservation and environmental groups, formed the Ohio Agricultural Conservation Initiative (OACI). Through this collaboration and OACI's certification program, farmers' conservation practices are assessed, and proposed practices are reviewed to ensure their completion to secure funding. Consequently, over 3,200 farmers and 2.2 million acres in the Western Lake Erie Basin have enrolled in H2Ohio to date.

Investments in farmers' best management practices have proven to be a significant success. Precision agriculture and more intensive soil testing, combined with the Tri-State Fertilizer Recommendations led by OSU, have resulted in a 30% decrease in the amount of fertilizer applied in the WLEB. Over the same period, the median soil test phosphorus levels decreased by 32%. Nearly 2.2 million acres in the Western Lake Erie Basin are currently managed by farmers through voluntary nutrient management plans (VNMPs), which not only help reduce the phosphorus load entering Lake Erie but also ensure the vitality of Ohio's water quality for generations to come.

Over the past five years, there has been a consistent downward trend in the flow-weighted mean concentration of dissolved reactive phosphorus (DRP) observed at the Waterville monitoring location. While we are optimistic that this trend will continue, it can only do so with continued technical and financial support provided to Ohio's farmers under Governor DeWine's H2Ohio Initiative. We request that funding levels for H2Ohio across all relevant agencies (ODA, ODNR, OEPA) be restored to the as-introduced levels so that we can build on the significant progress we have made thus far.



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Brownfield Remediation:

Ohio Farm Bureau greatly appreciates the continued investment in Brownfield Remediation in the latest version of HB 96. This program helps prepare previously unavailable sites that already have much of the surrounding resources and infrastructure necessary for a variety of development, and encourages that development away from farmland. Preserving our industry's most critical and finite resource will always be a priority for Ohio Farm Bureau, and we applaud the House for including this provision.

OSU/Fifth Quarter:

Ensuring that our youth have access to the best educational opportunities is essential for preparing them to be successful members of Ohio's workforce. Agricultural education and career technical programs are a vital component of these opportunities, and we humbly request that the following line items be increased to help prepare the next generation of our workforce:

- **HC_1050:** Increase funding for the Agricultural 5th Quarter Project by an additional \$1.2 million over the biennium, totaling \$2.4 million for FY26-27. This project allows school districts to apply to DEW for grants each year to help fund stipends for agricultural educators who often spend much of their summers assisting students with hands-on learning experiences called Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAEs) at reduced or no pay.
- **HC_1391/HC_1392:** Restore OSU Extension and Ohio Agricultural Research funding to FY25 levels. The OSU Extension line items support 4-H in Ohio, which is one of the greatest opportunities for impact with the general public for agricultural education, and was founded in Clark County, Ohio, in 1902. The Ohio Agricultural Research line item supports the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center, along with many other research initiatives that are crucial for the future development of our industry.

Animal Disease Diagnostic Lab/Poultry Inspection

HC_1031: We would also like to highlight our support for an amendment increasing the appropriations for the Animal Health Programs and Poultry Inspection line items, adding \$627,500 per FY for each line item, for a total increase of \$2.51 million over the biennium. The ongoing Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) outbreak in west central Ohio has devastated local farmers and their communities. While we have dedicated staff at the ODA's Animal Disease Diagnostic Lab (ADDL) working tirelessly to run all the testing for this outbreak, they are simply overworked and understaffed to complete their routine and HPAI testing concurrently. These additional funds will ensure we can respond and prepare effectively should recent trends not continue.

Eminent Domain for Recreational Trails

We appreciate the inclusion of language prohibiting eminent domain from being used for the taking of property for recreational trails. OFBF has previously supported legislation, such as HB 64 of the 135th General Assembly, which included this provision among others that would better allow landowners an opportunity to defend themselves from overreaching corporate or



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government interests. Any purposeful changes to Ohio's eminent domain law should look to protect landowner rights, and this provision does precisely that.

Land Use

We would also like to highlight our support for a provision that earmarks \$500,000 per FY in the Soil and Water Division line item to provide grants to local governments for developing or updating local land use plans. Updating land use plans for local governments will help our communities decide their futures and set up all surrounding industries for success. We would encourage the General Assembly to further support these types of programs to help preserve farmland through better development planning that encourages community involvement to help promote smart growth.

We appreciate all the work the House has done so far in crafting a budget that will allow Ohio agriculture to remain the economic driver of our state, and especially to Chair Stewart for his leadership of this process. I would be happy to answer any questions at this time.