



**Ohio House Natural Resources Committee
Interested Party Testimony
House Bill 96**

Rebecca Mellino, Energy Policy Associate
The Nature Conservancy in Ohio
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Good morning Chairman Jones, Vice Chair Robb Blasdel, Ranking Member Rogers and members of the House Natural Resources Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit 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, water quality, and air pollution. 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 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 Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR). The funding levels in this budget reflect the importance of protecting Ohio's natural areas through invasive species control, wetland mitigation, and plugging orphaned wells. These tasks will ensure that Ohio's natural spaces 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 many of the efforts by these agencies 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 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. The Governor’s budget as contained in HB 96 builds on these successes and provides \$260M over the biennium to continue to improve water quality – including roughly \$46M in each year to ODNR and \$27M in each year to EPA to continue their work. ODNR’s H2Ohio appropriation will be used to 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.

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.

Rebecca Mellino
Energy Policy Associate
The Nature Conservancy in Ohio