



Testimony before the Ohio Senate Agriculture & Natural Resources Committee

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Ohio Lake Erie Commission

Regarding
Fiscal Years 2026-2027 Biennium Budget
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Good morning, Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Koehler, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of this Committee. My name is Joy Mulinex, and I am the Executive Director of the Ohio Lake Erie Commission. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the Lake Erie Commission's FY 2026-2027 budget.

The Commission is comprised of the directors of six state agencies that include the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, and the Departments of Natural Resources, Transportation, Health, Agriculture, and Development. There are also five additional members appointed by the Governor and the two board members of the Great Lakes Protection Fund Board. The members of the Commission represent the many different uses of Lake Erie--a natural resource, a driver for economic development, a premier destination for recreation, a drinking water source, and the foundation of enjoyment for so many Ohioans.

Ensuring Lake Erie's water quality is healthy and safe remains one of Governor DeWine's top priorities. The Commission continues to work closely with our agency partners, the research community, and many other groups and individuals to combat algal blooms on Lake Erie.

Excess nutrients are the cause of the annual harmful algal bloom that occurs every summer on Lake Erie. The sources of these nutrients are governed under multi-agency jurisdiction including agricultural and community sources. The Commission was tasked with coordinating nutrient reduction efforts under Governor DeWine's water quality initiative, H2Ohio, and Ohio's federally required Domestic Action Plan (DAP) which is a blueprint for reducing phosphorus

loads into Lake Erie under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. It's important to remember that the problem with harmful algal blooms will not be fixed quickly and will require consistent efforts by the state and other stakeholders every year. Many factors, including rainfall, have major impacts on the severity and size of the algal blooms. However, data from 2023 shows that Ohio met its 40% phosphorus reduction for dissolved reactive phosphorus during the springtime loading period for the Maumee River that year. We know we are making progress. We continue to learn and adjust our programs to make strides in the right direction. More work remains so that Ohio is consistently meeting all its phosphorus reduction targets in wet and dry weather years. The Commission's budget includes H2Ohio funds for two small projects that will help the state further refine and improve nutrient tracking in the Western Lake Erie Basin.

The Commission will be preparing an updated 2025 *Lake Erie Protection & Restoration Plan*. During the development of this Plan, the Commission consults extensively with our state agency partners, researchers, local communities and others so that the report reflects the state of Ohio's Lake Erie priorities. The Commission uses the dollars from the Lake Erie license plate sales to award competitive grants for projects that help implement the objectives of the Commission's Lake Erie Protection & Restoration Plan. Examples of grant awards from the Commission include projects like support to the Ohio Sea Grant's Clean Marinas Program to assess existing trash trapping technologies and develop outreach materials for more widespread adoption of the technologies across Lake Erie's tributaries as well as providing design and engineering costs to restore a floodplain on the Grand River.

I am happy to report continuing restoration progress at the federally designated Areas of Concern (AOCs), which are sites that do not meet the goals of the U.S.-Canadian Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. Three AOCs remain in Ohio—the Maumee, the Black, and the Cuyahoga Rivers. With federal funding support through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, the Commission anticipates removing two to three Beneficial Use Impairments in the next biennium.

To ensure that Ohio's ports and harbors continue to generate roughly \$25 billion in business revenue annually, the Commission will continue in this next biennium to work with a partnership that includes other state agencies, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and local stakeholders to ensure that the sediment dredged from Lake Erie's harbors is beneficially used and adds value to local communities. The Commission has awarded grants for new project planning and research showing that sediment is a beneficial farm field soil amendment.

In closing, for those of you who live near or visit Lake Erie, you already know that Lake Erie is a natural resource treasure for Ohio, providing abundant recreational opportunities and drinking water for nearly 3 million Ohioans. The Ohio Lake Erie Commission looks forward to continuing to work with our commissioners and our partners to promote, protect, and restore the lake for future generations. Thank you for considering the Governor's budget request for the Ohio Lake Erie Commission, and I welcome any questions you may have.