

SENATE AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Testimony of Theresa Dirksen, PE May 14, 2025

Good Morning Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Koehler, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee. My name is Theresa Dirksen. I am the Mercer County Agriculture and Natural Resources Director as well as the Grand Lake St. Marys Restoration Commission Facilitator. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the upcoming FY 26-27 Budget in regard to the H2Ohio program and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources budget.

I have been working on conservation projects in Mercer County for nearly 19 years. The harmful algal bloom issues in Grand Lake St. Marys and Lake Erie are nothing new. While many other water quality initiatives have been enacted, the H2Ohio program has been the first program to provide the most meaningful and consistent funding for the greatest variety of practices that improve water quality.

I have been the project manager for eight wetland projects in the Grand Lake St. Marys region that have been funded by H2Ohio through the Ohio Department of Natural Resources since the program began in 2019. In total, these projects have established 85 acres of new wetland, 120 acres of upland prairie habitat, and 30 acres of forested area. All these projects were funded under two H2Ohio awards for a total of \$3.2 million. Every wetland we have created is processing water to remove nutrients and improve water quality while also providing ancillary wildlife benefits. These project areas are publicly accessible and provide recreational opportunities for those in our community.

These projects are complex and require us to follow strict federal and state permitting guidelines. Design, permitting, contracting, physical construction, and seeding can take multiple years, which is necessary to provide the best final product. These projects take years to recover after construction before they can perform at their best, which is why we see a lag time between implementation and improved water quality results.

Additionally, I have been the project manager for multiple conservation ditch projects in Mercer County, several of which were funded by the H2Ohio program. Since 2019, we have constructed nearly seven miles of conservation ditches, with half of that length being funded by the H2Ohio program through the Ohio Department of Agriculture.

In my work with the local Soil and Water Conservation District, I have seen first-hand the H2Ohio program's impact on farmers. As a farmland owner and previous dairy farm operator myself, I understand what it takes to implement conservation on a farm. It comes at a steep price, often with a long return on investment. The H2Ohio programs provide an incentive to farm operators to try something new with the hopes that the benefit of the practices is realized and implemented long term on the farm.

H2Ohio is improving water quality in Ohio, but the work is not done. The momentum must continue to reach the nutrient loading targets set by the state agencies in Ohio. And not for just Lake Erie, but Grand Lake St. Marys, the Miami River, Scioto River and everything in between. Other states have looked to Ohio as the model for water quality improvement, so Ohio must not take its foot off the gas.

I am here today to ask that funding for the H2Ohio program be restored to the original proposed amount of \$270 million. I would also ask Ohio to consider long-term funding utilizing Ohio's bonding capacity for this critical clean water program.

In addition to highlighting the importance of the H2Ohio Program, I would like to use this opportunity today to speak on the importance of ODNR's Division of Parks and Watercraft. From State Park upkeep, safety and the dredging program, the Division provides many unique services to Ohioans. I would especially call attention to the Dredging program, because in Grand Lake St. Marys, dredging is crucial to improved water quality. The lake is very shallow and nutrients accumulate in the sediment, exasperating the harmful algal blooms. The Dredging program has already suffered due to the COVID crisis, maintenance issues, and labor issues. Further cuts to the Division's budget could cripple the dredging program and water quality would suffer.

The Division of Parks and Watercraft proposed a flat budget from the General Revenue Fund due to the anticipation of receiving bonus payments from oil and gas leases. This would have saved taxpayer dollars, however, the House cut the oil and gas bonus payments from the Division of Parks' budget. The impact of this cut will require the Division to cut staff and law enforcement, dredging work, facility maintenance and wage increases. The Division cannot withstand the loss of more labor or access to funds to maintain equipment.

Mercer County, the Grand Lake St. Marys Lake Facilities Authority, and the Lake Restoration Commission have a great working relationship with ODNR. We rely on each other in our efforts to continue to improve water quality in Grand Lake St. Marys and have been quite successful. Please restore the \$40 million in the budget for ODNR's Division of Parks and Watercraft.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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