



Ohio Federation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts

Ohio Senate
Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
House Bill 96
May 14, 2025

Chairman Schaffer, Vice-Chair Koehler, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson , and members of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, thank you for allowing us to provide testimony before your committee this morning. My name is Samantha Steiner. I am the president of the Ohio Federation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts. I am also a farmer and a Supervisor on the Warren SWCD board.

I know many of you have great relationships with Soil and Water Districts in your communities. Our 88 county SWCD's pride themselves on being "boots on the ground" to get essential conservation work accomplished. Each district is diverse and is "locally-led," which means each district serves to address the vast array of conservation, agriculture, natural resources and environmentally-based issues focused on the needs of the community it represents. SWCDs operate critically needed programs centered around soil health and water quality and rely on non-mandated funding allocated at the local and state level.

Ohio's SWCDs consist of 440 locally elected, uncompensated board members who employ over 500 people statewide. We work "one-on-one" with farmers and communities to survey and design environmentally responsible projects such as surface and subsurface drainage and livestock waste management facilities, and provide resources for stormwater assistance, among others; We work collaboratively with partners to deliver technical assistance, financial support and valuable conservation programs to land owners; and, we engage and educate the public about natural resources issues through special programs, workshops, events and academic experiences.

Ohio SWCDs have been funded through a combination of local and state match funding with a goal of 1:1 match. Local governments have, for the most part, tried to remain strong and provide some funding to the SWCDs. The state match comes from four different places: General Revenue Funds, a fee on Construction and Demolition Debris, a fee on Solid Waste and a Scrap Tire Fee.

Overall, districts are pleased with the executive version of the budget. We appreciate the increases in our 5VBO fund that we have seen over the last two biennial budgets, and the House extension of our funding through the scrap tire program.

We also appreciate the continued support of districts through the state match line item. While we are very thankful for this support, we would appreciate your consideration of an inflationary increase. Our districts are no different than any other division of government, or us personally, we



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are also seeing an increase in costs. We are also seeing an increase in local funding support. In the last biennium the match rate was at 84.2%. At the current level of funding, the match rate will drop to around 79-80%. Municipal and County support of districts has outpaced state support for a while now and we would like to see that figure come a little closer together. These funds are predominantly used for salary, those “boots on the ground” that are out serving our farmers and communities. As presented, this match rate would be the lowest it has been since 2019.

Recently, our districts were asked to step up and support farmers with drought relief, with no administrative overhead. They eagerly took on this challenge because as more than one administrator said, “anything to help our farmers.”

Our districts are doing amazing work in urban communities, with stormwater planning, urban agriculture, and urban conservation practices.

SWCDs are taking on more work and we are proud of everything they are doing. An inflationary increase, as much as other entities in the state are receiving, seems appropriate for this work.

We are also concerned about the reduction in support of the H2Ohio programs. Ohio farmers have overwhelmingly embraced H2Ohio and interest in the program remains strong. H2Ohio is making a difference in water quality but it is also making a difference in our ability to talk to farmers about conservation. Since 2019, this program was largely located in the Western Lake Erie Basin, but has now gone statewide. Our farmers in southern Ohio, where I am from, are looking forward to the opportunity to learn from this program and it would be unfortunate if the program is rolled back and they do not have this opportunity.

Through the support of H2Ohio phosphorus reductions in the WLEB have reached 420,000 pounds, that is more than half way to our goal of 800,000 pounds. Based on math alone, the reduction in funding would take us from 3,200 farmers participating in the program to around 1,500. Many of our farmers in this program are still learning management strategies for the conservation programs that are making a difference. We urge your support of H2Ohio and the full restoration of funding.

During the creation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was quoted as saying, “the nation that destroys its soil, destroys itself.” As districts, we have been talking a lot about that in recent weeks. I think it is important to recognize that the true beneficiary of conservation is not the farmer. It is the people of this state and this country that are the true beneficiaries. Conservation allows us to provide food and fiber for ourselves, protect natural resources and improve water quality for the benefit of all.

As always, on behalf of our soil and water conservation districts, we appreciate your support. I would be happy to answer any questions.