

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 Jeff Duling. I am the chair of the Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative and a past-president of the Ohio Federation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts. I am also a 7th generation Putnam County farmer where I raise row crops, hogs, cattle and the chickens my wife really wanted. I also volunteer as a supervisor on the Putnam Soil and Water Conservation District board.

I am here today to speak with you on behalf of the partners in the Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative. The OACI bring together diverse stakeholders, our agriculture partners and environmental NGOs's to improve Ohio's water quality through measurement, education, and certification of Ohio's farmers in the successful implementation of on-farm conservation and nutrient management practices. As a group we are very concerned about the cuts to agriculture's portion of the H2Ohio budget. I am a manure-maker and I would like to emphasize that manure is not a bad word. According to our OACI research somewhere between 12-14% of farmers in the WLEB are using manure, and of those, upwards of 90% were following USDA 590 standards for setbacks and applications. Our feeding rations have become more efficient, reducing almost 30% of phosphorus in manure since 2015 according to recent studies done at The Ohio State University. Our farmers are trying to manage this organic nutrient properly, they are trying new skills using the 4R's, but they still need cost-share assistance in implementing many of these programs.

I believe good things do happen under the covers. And by that I mean cover crops. One thing I know is during the winter I wear a hat over my head to protect me from the elements. And I will suggest to you that the best thing we can do in the winter is to keep our ground covered with cover crops. H2Ohio encourages farmers to use an over-wintering cover crop. I will tell you that **here is where I think H2Ohio has made me a better farmer.** Because of some of the requirements of H2Ohio, I began planting my covers earlier, for a better stand. I have also tried new practices such as interseeding, so I am not as susceptible to unpredictable fall weather during the busiest season. OACI's research in the Upper Sandusky indicates that 44% of farmers are subsurface applying manure into a growing cover crop. That is definitely an upward trend and the kind of conservation we like to see. Implementation of these practices continues to grow because of H2Ohio.



H2Ohio currently has 3,200 farmers enrolled in H2Ohio, based on simple math with the reductions in the House, that would reduce that number to 1,500 and the number of statewide acres enrolled would decrease from 2.2 million to 1 million. This will definitely reduce the conservation practices that have led to 420,000 pounds of phosphorus runoff being reduced. Now, I am not suggesting that it will be some kind of wild west where farmers do silly things, but I will tell you that farmers will begin to make different choices, like me. Our OACI data affirms the belief that 50% of the acres in the WLEB are rented, many of my acres are rented too. Those acres that are rented will probably not have cover crops planted on them. Covers aren't free and the management of them is time consuming, so I will likely not put them on acres where I may not see that benefit. Farmers will make choices.

In the WLEB, we have assembled the most advanced conservation delivery system in the country. We are the envy of our peers. It has been done through the investment of trained technicians and farmers who share their experiences and their stories. This has largely been accomplished through H2Ohio, and the reduction in funding will affect this system. And while I hate to see that for my friends and neighbors, I also wanted that system to be in place for the rest of the state. Those farmers need the opportunity to improve their practices too. We still have many folks in my area that are learning how to manage cover crops. It is not an exact science and they need technical assistance and the cost-share to help them continue.

EPA's Mass Balance study verifies that these practices are making a difference. We continue to see a measurable reduction in soil test phosphorus. It also recognizes that farmers are applying less commercial phosphorus. Some of this is because of education but also because the resources have been available to encourage change. ODA has been a great partner. Their H2Ohio dollars have been contracted and will be paid out upon verification of practices through crop year 25. Payments are not made to farmers until their practices are verified as complete.

Your support of H2Ohio would be greatly appreciated. Not just for farmers, but for all Ohio's citizens as we look to sharpen our skills in improving water quality and being the most efficient we can be with our natural resources. They are a gift that we are blessed with in this state and in this country and we need to continue to do our best to preserve them.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important issue, I will be happy to answer any questions.

