

Lake Erie Foundation
Matt Fisher, Vice President
Interested Party Testimony
Substitute House Bill 96

Introduction and Background

Chairman Shaffer, Vice Chairman Koehler, ranking member Senator Hicks Hudson and Members of the Committee, my name is Matt Fisher, and I am Vice President of the Lake Erie Foundation. I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you about the importance of funding the budget for H2Ohio.

Lake Erie Foundation is passionate about supporting and improving the water quality of Lake Erie. Not only do 11 million people get their drinking water from Lake Erie, but Lake Erie provides \$20 Billion of tourism dollars and 131,000 jobs to the state which generates \$2.5 Billion in tax revenue. It is critical that we maintain the H2Ohio budget at the Executive Version so that we can keep both these economic dollars and our beautiful natural resource healthy.

The board members of Lake Erie Foundation all come from businesses that are either on Lake Erie, or we each have a strong business background. We understand pressures on expenses, and budget cuts. But we don't know if the H2Ohio budget was cut because of perceived lack of performance or if the State simply needs to cut many major programs.

We appreciate the leadership that the Governor and General Assembly has shown in supporting H2Ohio over the last several years. We are concerned with the House Version level of funding and are hopeful that we can make the case as to why the budget should be restored and potentially somewhat redirected to get better return on this significant investment. As noted above, Lake Erie is one of the economic engines of the state and we believe that investing H2Ohio dollars in the Northwest Ohio region is the best way for the state to get a quantifiable return on investment.

But cutting the budget now basically eliminates the good work that has happened in the last 5 or so years. You heard last week that it took 10+ years to get to this point. You also heard that the water quality of Grand Lake St Mary's is improving due to the work of the agencies, the farmers involved, and the leadership of Theresa Dirkson. That work in Mercer County has been going on for 12-13 years. But cutting the budget now in Northwest Ohio will have a long-term negative impact on Lake Erie.

ODNR

ODNR has been a significant part of H2Ohio and was able to start immediately in the fall of 2019. Since then, ODNR has implemented an impressive 203 wetland projects throughout Ohio designed to absorb phosphorous. Most importantly, the agency has directed their focus to fields that are high in phosphorus, which have the greatest run off into the Maumee and Sandusky Rivers. Ultimately ODNR gets an impressive bang for their buck. ODNR has also had

successful programs in the Grand Lake St. Mary's watershed. ODNR has utilized a private/public approach to their installations, which has enabled their program to move quickly and be extremely effective. We believe that the use of public/private partnerships can help expedite results. Organizations like Lake Erie Foundation stand ready to help the state achieve success.

Ohio Department of Agriculture

Due to Covid, the agriculture section of H2Ohio, was started about 18 months after the ODNR launch of H2Ohio. The agriculture H2Ohio program is 100% voluntary and was initially rolled out to 14 counties in NW Ohio. Since then, 43% of the fields in NW Ohio have volunteered to participate in implementing one of the 10 practices in H2Ohio.

Also, and I say this respectfully, shifting H2Ohio funds away from NW Ohio to other parts of the state is perhaps not the most prudent or logical next step. I can't emphasize enough that our work in Northwest Ohio is not close to being done. We need a better track record of what has been successful, we need to be confident which practices and programs work best, and we need to focus state resources on things that actually work on reducing phosphorous to Lake Erie. Once we know what actually works, then perhaps we can look at how to implement these practices and projects throughout Ohio. Again, I emphasize the economic aspect of Lake Erie in keeping finite state dollars focused to ensure that Ohio obtains a return on investment.

Lake Erie Foundation and key Lake Erie scientists that you have heard from or will hear from believe that a small percent of the fields in NW Ohio account for a significantly disproportionate amount of the phosphorus that ends up at the mouth of the Maumee leading to harmful algal blooms in Lake Erie.

Because Department of Agriculture H2Ohio program has been 100% volunteer, we believe that this has not attracted the fields that are high/old phosphorous, sometimes referred to as legacy fields. The range varies and it is difficult to estimate, but leading scientists agree that **10-13% of fields account for 35-50% of the runoff**. We believe there is a strong possibility that these high/old phosphorus fields have not signed up for agriculture part of H2Ohio. So we have identified the potential problem, but we also want to importantly point out here that we have a solution in mind.

There is in fact a way to find the high phosphorus fields and our organization has had success working with agricultural retailers and farmers to participate in H2Ohio. Confidentiality is key and we need to continue to keep the information confidential and partner with the agricultural community.

Successful Projects and Recommendation

There are 3 recent examples where a focus on high phosphorus fields has been effective.

1. Ohio State is nearly complete with a project where Phosphorus filters were placed at the edge of high/old phosphorus fields. This study shows fields with a removal of 86% of DRP and

51% of DRP, well above the goal of 40% reduction. This Ohio State Phosphorus filter project is what has given our group – Lake Erie Foundation-- the confidence that our project will be successful, and we are hoping that our project will serve as a template on how to focus on high phosphorus fields.

2. As part of H2Ohio, in 2021 Lake Erie Foundation helped sponsor a pilot study at Shallow Run—about 20 miles west of Upper Sandusky -- to accelerate the adoption of practices within a NW Ohio sub watershed to measure which practices and programs are most effective in reducing run off or managing water that is running off agriculture fields. We are already seeing improvements against the control watershed and are gaining a good understanding of which practices are most effective.
3. This has been discussed several times in the last week, but 14 years ago Grand Lake St Mary's was declared impaired. After significant effort and coordination from an incredible engineer in Mercer County, Theresa Dirkson, and the predominately livestock farmers in the watershed, there has been an implementation of practices that have reduced the runoff from the fields and dramatically improved water quality running into GLSM.

One potential solution to address high phosphorous fields is to increase focus and attention on installing phosphorous filters at the edge of field. This practice is relatively non-invasive and focuses on managing water flow. In June 2024, the General Assembly allocated to the Lake Erie Foundation a grant of \$500,000 from the One-Time Strategic Community Improvement Fund (OTSCIF) to be used towards a project that involves installing Phosphorus filters at the edge of high phosphorus fields in NW Ohio. This project is located in the Defiance/Napoleon area. This initiative is on schedule, and we are hopeful that this project will demonstrate an efficient method to manage water on fields and capture nutrient run off, resulting in less phosphorus in the Maumee. I want to highlight that the farmers that are participating in this project have been outstanding and eager to help, as also has been the crop consultant who helped us locate the high phosphorus fields.

This is not just Lake Erie Foundation making this recommendation, there are leading scientists adamantly support the idea that more programs and practices need to be directed to high phosphorous fields.

Conclusion

We urgently support that both ODNR and ODA's H2Ohio budget be restored, but we firmly believe that a more significant part of ODA's budget should be directed to high phosphorus fields similar to how ODNR has focused so there is a better return on the H2Ohio investment. It would be detrimental to the long-term health of Lake Erie to remove funding from NW Ohio. Once we truly have a playbook for high degree of successfully improving water quality then it makes sense to spread to other parts of Ohio. Thank you for your time and I welcome any questions you have.