



OHIO DAIRY PRODUCERS ASSOCIATION

*Supporting Ohio's dairy production industry; optimizing profitability and productivity;
addressing issues that affect dairy producers*

Ohio Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee

Scott Higgins, CEO

Ohio Dairy Producers Association

Amended Substitute House Bill 96

May 14, 2025

Chairman Schaffer, Vice-Chair Koehler, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of HB 96, the state operating budget for Fiscal Years 2026-2027.

My name is Scott Higgins, and I am the CEO of the Ohio Dairy Producers Association. I appreciate the work of this committee and understand the tremendous undertaking as you deliberate on the budget.

By way of background, the ODPa is a grassroots legislative, research, and producer education organization, representing dairy farmers from across the state, regardless of farm size, breed or production strategy, marketing preference, or political affiliation.

Ohio is home to 253,000 dairy cows that live on 1,400 farms and produce 653 million gallons of milk annually. The total economic impact of dairy products produced and sold in Ohio is just over \$35 billion, which generates 136,300 jobs for Ohioans.

Ohio is ranked 12th in total milk production in the nation and 5th in the number of processing and receiving plants. Ohio is proud to be ranked #1 in Swiss cheese and #2 in lowfat cottage cheese production.

There are four major issues I will address in my testimony:

- SNAP benefit restrictions;
- H2Ohio budget;
- The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine budget;
- Ohio Department of Agriculture Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory budget.

SNAP Benefit Restrictions

ODPA is a part of a 15-member business coalition that is opposed to SNAP benefit restrictions as we believe these will have very little impact on health outcomes and cause major disruptions in how people access food for a balanced diet. The House-passed budget included a restriction for beverages. While milk was not included, there is a Senate proposal to eliminate ice cream from SNAP purchases.

Ice cream is a nutritionally dense food, which contains all three macronutrients – carbohydrates, fat and protein along with additional micronutrients, not limited to calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, iodine and zinc. Lactose comprises 20% of the carbohydrates found in ice cream, which is a vital nutrient to the metabolism of calcium and phosphorus. The bioavailability of these mineral components is very high in ice cream (99%). The definition of ice cream requires $\geq 10\%$ milk fat positively impacting the absorption of fat-soluble vitamins A, D and E. Ice cream provides all 9 essential amino acids, including tryptophan and lysine which are integral to the production of niacin (vitamin B3) and serotonin impacting muscle tissue growth and involved in cardiac and bone function.

Ohio's dairy farmers support all efforts to eliminate fraud in the SNAP system and encourage participants to

gain future employment and not be reliant upon the SNAP program. However, I respectfully ask this committee to provide SNAP beneficiaries, many who are veterans and elderly, to have dignity at the grocery store - and eliminate any benefit restrictions.

H2Ohio

To date, more than 3,200 farmers are participating in H2Ohio, with 2.2 million acres enrolled in the program. Data trends show this will reduce 420,000 pounds of phosphorus runoff.

Unfortunately, the as-passed House budget reduces H2Ohio by \$120 million, almost 45%. This will significantly reduce the overall acreage footprint, practices offered, and conservation payments. The number of farmers enrolled will decrease from approximately 3,200 to 1,500. Additionally, the number of statewide acres will decrease from 2.2 million to 1 million.

Under the proposed as-passed House budget, the number of acres in the Western Lake Erie Basin will decrease from 43% to 18-22%. This is a huge loss of conservation practices that have proven to reduce sediment loss on the farm and have supported water quality efforts.

The truth is, there are many farmers who will not be able to afford to continue these best management practices without the support of the H2Ohio program. We have made significant progress in improving water quality and we urge the Senate to fund the program at the as-introduced levels at \$270 million.

Starting in 2018, I worked diligently to form a collaboration with the environmental community to address water quality and take actions that work toward reducing the movement of nutrients from farm fields into our waterways. The premise of the agreement was to utilize sound and proven science to guide the efforts of farmers, the environmental community, and our conservation partners. We made a commitment to work toward lowering phosphorous levels in on our farms and we are delivering results! I am pleased to share that ODA has recently reported that phosphorus levels on farm fields have declined. High and very high soil phosphorus levels have declined by 9% since 2005! In addition, agriculture is utilizing innovative strategies to reduce phosphorus in animal diets while maintaining healthy and productive livestock. The partnership between H2Ohio and OACI is working. For many years, it has been stated that agriculture is contributing over 80% of the nutrient load in Ohio's waterways. New information gained from science reveals that other resources are contributing greater portions of the nutrient load than originally projected. Agriculture continues to be committed to doing its part, but the responsibility for improving Ohio's waterways is a shared responsibility of all contributing factors.

The Ohio State's College of Veterinary Medicine

There are currently 18 counties that are USDA-designated rural veterinary shortage areas. Due to this critical issue, Governor DeWine included \$20 million for The Ohio State's College of Veterinary Medicine to help address the state's veterinarian shortage. During the House budget process, the program was reduced by \$5 million.

The funding is essential to sustain excellence, train more veterinarians, and protect Ohio's animals, people and agriculture. The Ohio's only College of Veterinary Medicine's Protect One Health in Ohio (OHIO) initiative includes three interconnected pillars aimed at expanding veterinary education for Ohio students, especially those from underserved areas, by increasing class sizes and creating long-term strategies for recruiting and retaining large animal and rural veterinarians. Ohio needs more large animal veterinarians, and this funding will help us achieve that goal while meeting the needs of the underserved communities.

Additionally, the establishment of an Emerging Infectious Disease Center will enhance disease surveillance, risk assessment, and preemptive research to protect the state and its animals and people. The current

outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) provides a perfect case study for why the Emerging Infectious Disease Center is so critical to protecting Ohio's agricultural industry.

Ohio's dairy industry strongly urges the Senate to prioritize this critical funding for veterinary medicine programs in the biennial budget and we encourage you to consider supporting and submitting the attached amendment. Without this funding, the state will remain particularly vulnerable to infectious disease outbreaks that could decimate our animal agricultural industry and put people's health at risk.

Ohio Department of Agriculture Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory (ADDL)

The ongoing Highly Pathogenic Avian influenza (HPAI) outbreak in west central Ohio has presented many challenges for the Ohio's agricultural industry. This has required daily, weekly, and ongoing laboratory tests. Samples for testing are collected on farm and sent to the Ohio Department of Agriculture Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory (ADDL).

ODA's ADDL is simply understaffed to deal with the massive quantity of samples they receive each day. While all parties are managing the situation, the lab often struggles to provide results in a timely manner. Laboratory workers are working long hours performing tedious task that require the utmost sensitivity and accountability.

Ohio Commodity Groups, animal agriculture companies, and farmers have been asking ADDL to develop and implement additional tests to meet industry requirements. ODA ADDL can develop and implement these tests; they just do not have adequate staff to do so. Our farmers and companies are currently sending these tests out of state. These tests should be completed in Ohio at the ADDL.

We are requesting \$2,510,000 for the biennium to meet these growing demands that protect human and animal health.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I am happy to answer any questions.