

Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
Proponent Testimony, Am. Sub. H.B. No. 96 (Stewart)
Shawn Aiken, National Water Market Leader, Associate Vice President, Verdantas
Wednesday, May 14, 2025

Chair Schaffer, Vice Chair Koehler, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony for the H2Ohio funding provisions in House Bill 96, the main operating budget for fiscal years 2026 and 2027.

My name is Shawn Aiken and I am the National Water Market Leader with Verdantas. I am providing this testimony to respectfully request the restoration of the full funding amount of \$270 million proposed by Governor DeWine for the H2Ohio program in House Bill 96.

Verdantas is a full-service consulting company in the environmental, water, and energy transition infrastructure markets. In the state of Ohio, we have 10 offices and 540 employees. For decades, our scientists, engineers, and other professionals at Verdantas, perhaps working under the company names of Hull & Associates, Inc., CT Consultants, Jobes Henderson, or other firms at the time that are now within Verdantas, have had the privilege of working with the state to help address environmental challenges and improve our natural resources.

We recognize some of the massive accomplishments of the H2Ohio program since its launch in 2019, including ODNR's work with over 200 projects to establish and enhance over 18,500 acres of wetlands and associated habitat; ODA's enrollment of 2.2 million acres by 3,200 agricultural producers to participate in voluntary nutrient reduction practices; and Ohio EPA's 312 household sewage treatment system projects, 63 water or wastewater infrastructure projects, and 723 lead line replacements. We commend Governor DeWine and the legislators for establishing and funding this extremely worthwhile program that is helping to reduce nutrient loads into our waterways, improve water quality and in-water and upland habitat, address public health concerns, and create a vibrant ecosystem to enhance the quality of life for Ohioans and visitors. We also applaud the agency staff for their professionalism, attention to detail, strong cooperation with project teams, and for the management of nimble programs.

Verdantas has worked, and is working, with ODNR and project implementers to study, design, permit, and/or oversee construction of 9 H2Ohio-funded wetland and habitat creation and restoration projects valued at \$13.5 million. We also worked, or are working, with Ohio EPA and lead implementers to plan, design and/or oversee installation or construction of 11 equipment, water, and sewer improvement projects funded through H2Ohio grants.

In addition to the large nutrient reduction and water quality and public health improvements realized through H2Ohio projects, we have witnessed first-hand many additional benefits from this program. H2Ohio funds have leveraged millions of dollars in federal grants and private investments. Several projects provide significant water storage capacity that will reduce flooding during heavy rain events. In-river improvements in a H2Ohio-funded project in Toledo protect important public and private boating and park infrastructure along the shoreline. The ability to use funds for adaptive management activities to ensure projects are functioning as intended is extremely valuable. The positive relationships established between the agencies, landowners, nonprofit organizations, and private partners through these important projects will also lead to new opportunities.

The H2Ohio program is a highly successful program. By supporting the appropriation for the H2Ohio program at Governor DeWine's requested \$270 million, you will allow for continued progress to reduce nutrient loading and reduce harmful algal blooms in Lake Erie, other lakes, and our rivers while also addressing other important needs to protect and improve water quality statewide.

Chair Schaffer and members of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony and to share our views on the importance of fully funding the H2Ohio program to provide the necessary resources Ohio needs to address challenges to enable the state to thrive in the years to come.



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