



**Ohio Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
Interested Party Testimony
House Bill 96**

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Good afternoon, Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Koehler, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and members of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this written testimony as an interested party on House Bill 96, the FY2026-27 biennial budget.

Black Swamp Conservancy is a regional conservation organization with a mission of preserving and enhancing family farms and natural habitats in northwest Ohio for the benefit of current and future generations. Since its founding in 1993, the organization has preserved more than 22,000 acres of land. This includes 30 nature preserves owned by the Conservancy and/or its many local park district, municipality and nonprofit partners. We invite you to visit our nature preserves, which provide recreational and educational opportunities for Ohioans and contribute to more vibrant wildlife populations, and cleaner air and water in our state.

Black Swamp Conservancy strongly supports the Governor's proposed funding for H2Ohio in his budget. We would like to call your attention to a few specific items in the House version of HB 96 that are of significant concern:

Restore funding for the H2Ohio water quality initiative

Nothing is more important than having clean water to drink. By conserving and restoring wetlands, forests, and other natural areas, we can reduce runoff and toxins in the lakes, rivers, and streams that provide us this essential resource. During the 2014 Toledo Water Crisis, the community of northwest Ohio personally experienced the loss of access to drinking water. More than 500,000 Ohioans could not drink or use our water in any way because of the toxic algal blooms present in Lake Erie. Thanks to the foresight of Governor DeWine and the members of the 133rd General Assembly, the H2Ohio program was launched in 2019 to begin tackling the dangerous risks from algal blooms and other threats to clean water in Lake Erie and across the State.

In partnership with Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR), The Black Swamp Conservancy has completed fourteen wetland restoration projects in the Western Lake Erie Basin under H2Ohio.

H2Ohio projects have made significant and demonstrable progress toward improving water quality in Ohio. Research scientists with the Lake Erie Aquatic Network are conducting thorough analysis of H2Ohio restoration projects to determine the associated nutrient reduction benefits. Their reporting conservatively estimates that at just one of the Conservancy's H2Ohio restoration sites (Forder Bridge Preserve in Paulding County) 160 pounds of phosphorus and 645 pounds of nitrogen are prevented from entering the Maumee River – and eventually Lake Erie – each year.

Despite the substantial progress that has been made, much more work is still needed. Lake Erie continues to experience annual toxic algal blooms. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the 2024 algal bloom began earlier in the year than all previous blooms and was measured as moderately severe (severity index 6.6).

The reality is that this problem was not created in six years and addressing it will require a sustained investment over time. Unfortunately, changes to the program made in the House version of this bill will hobble the administering agencies' ability to continue yielding the same exceptional results the program has been able to achieve since its inception. The House version of HB 96 includes a 45% budget reduction on average across all administering agencies to H2Ohio funds. Reduction at this level undermines the investments that are currently paying off in cleaner water for Ohioans.

For these reasons, Black Swamp Conservancy thanks the Senate for your past support of H2Ohio and respectfully urges the Senate to restore H2Ohio funding to the levels in the As Introduced version of the budget.

Eliminate the prohibition on using H2Ohio funds for purchases of land or conservation easements

In addition to the cuts to H2Ohio funding, the House version of the budget included a provision that would prohibit the use of H2Ohio funds to purchase land or conservation easements. This prohibition would deeply affect ODNR's ability to secure use of land for its projects and remove the important mechanisms needed to protect the investments it is making.

ODNR and its partners, including the Conservancy, are accomplishing important water quality improvement projects by working with willing landowners. Without the ability to purchase land / conservation easements and fairly compensate the landowners we work with, access to the land needed to complete H2Ohio wetland restorations would be significantly limited. This would be counterintuitive to the current and deliberate process of strategically siting H2Ohio projects in those areas that provide the greatest return on investment with regard to nutrient reduction.

In addition to the important water quality benefits, these lands also serve as an important economic driver for Ohio through activities like hiking, camping, hunting, fishing, and boating. In 2022 alone, wildlife-based recreation contributed nearly \$12.5 billion to the state's economy. These activities supported nearly 80,000 jobs and generated \$4 billion in income. Moreover, studies have shown that, in Ohio, access to green spaces is linked to higher property values, higher satisfaction with living conditions, and a stronger sense of community.

The Black Swamp Conservancy respectfully urges the Senate to remove the prohibition on using H2Ohio program funds to acquire land or easements.

Thank you for your consideration of this written testimony as an interested party on HB 96. We look forward to continuing to work together to protect Ohio's valuable fresh water resources and make our state an even better place to live, work and play.

Respectfully Submitted
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The Black Swamp Conservancy