



Working together for Ohio farmers to advance agriculture and strengthen our communities.

**Senate Finance Committee
House Bill 96 Interested Party Testimony
Evan Callicoa, Director of State Policy**

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and other honorable members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit comments regarding HB 96. The 2026-2027 Operating Budget includes many opportunities to help agriculture in Ohio continue to be the economic driver it is today. We would like to highlight a few provisions in the budget that are important to Ohio agriculture and would appreciate your consideration of these important issues.

H2Ohio:

Since 2019, under the leadership of Gov. DeWine and the General Assembly, the H2Ohio program has played a crucial role in retaining nutrients in fields, providing farmers with additional tools to be stewards of Ohio's waterways. To encourage participation among various groups in H2Ohio, the agricultural community, university researchers, soil and water districts, and conservation and environmental groups formed the Ohio Agricultural Conservation Initiative (OACI). Through this collaboration and OACI's certification program, farmers' conservation practices are assessed, and proposed practices are reviewed to ensure their completion for securing funding. Consequently, over 3,200 farmers and 2.2 million acres in the Western Lake Erie Basin have enrolled in H2Ohio to date.

Investments in farmers' best management practices have proven to be a significant success. Precision agriculture and more intensive soil testing, combined with the Tri-State Fertilizer Recommendations led by OSU, have resulted in a 30% decrease in the amount of fertilizer applied in the WLEB. Over the same period, the median soil test phosphorus levels decreased by 32%. Nearly 2.2 million acres in the Western Lake Erie Basin are currently managed by farmers through voluntary nutrient management plans (VNMPs), which not only help reduce the phosphorus load entering Lake Erie but also ensure the vitality of Ohio's water quality for generations to come.

Over the past five years, there has been a consistent downward trend in the flow-weighted mean concentration of dissolved reactive phosphorus (DRP) observed at the Waterville monitoring location, which is one of the most critical monitoring points in the whole basin. While we are optimistic that this trend will continue, it can only do so with continued technical and financial support provided to Ohio's farmers under Governor DeWine's H2Ohio Initiative. We request that funding levels for H2Ohio across all relevant agencies (ODA, ODNR, OEPA) be restored to the as-introduced levels so that we can build on the significant progress we have made thus far (**Amendment SC_136_0480**).

Brownfield Remediation:



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Ohio Farm Bureau greatly appreciates the continued investment in Brownfield Remediation in the House-passed version of HB 96. This program helps prepare previously unavailable sites that already have much of the surrounding resources and infrastructure necessary for various development and encourages that development away from farmland. Preserving our industry's most critical and finite resource will always be a priority for Ohio Farm Bureau, and we urge the Senate to retain this provision.

Workforce/Agricultural Education:

Ensuring our youth have access to the best educational opportunities is essential for preparing them to be successful members of Ohio's workforce. Agricultural education and career technical programs are a vital component of these opportunities, and we humbly request that the following line items be increased to help prepare the next generation of our workforce:

- **5th Quarter Project:** Increase funding for the Agricultural 5th Quarter Project by an additional \$1.2 million over the biennium, totaling \$2.4 million for FY26- 27. This project allows school districts to apply to DEW for grants each year to help fund stipends for agricultural educators who often spend considerable time outside the regular school day and summer assisting students with hands-on learning experiences called Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAEs) at reduced pay. We request the addition of **Amendment SC_136_1194** to allow our stellar ag educators to create more opportunities for Ohio students.
- **Restore OSU Extension and Ohio Agricultural Research funding to FY25 levels.** The OSU Extension line items support 4-H in Ohio, which is one of the greatest opportunities for impact with the general public for agricultural education, and was founded in Clark County, Ohio, in 1902. The Ohio Agricultural Research line item supports the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center, along with many other research initiatives that are crucial for the future development of our industry (**SC_136_1234, SC_136_1235**).

Animal Disease Diagnostic Lab/Poultry Inspection

We would also like to highlight our support for an amendment increasing the appropriations for the Animal Health Programs and Poultry Inspection line items, adding \$627,500 per FY for each line item, for a total increase of \$2.51 million over the biennium. The ongoing Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) outbreak in west central Ohio has devastated local farmers and their communities. While we have dedicated staff at the ODA's Animal Disease Diagnostic Lab (ADDL) working tirelessly to run all the testing for this outbreak, they are simply overworked and understaffed to complete their routine and HPAI testing concurrently. These additional funds will ensure we can respond and prepare effectively should recent trends not continue.

I have included with my testimony a one-pager detailing all of our budget priorities, and I encourage the committee to consider these when deliberating over the coming weeks. We appreciate all the work the General Assembly has done so far in crafting a budget that will allow Ohio agriculture to remain the economic driver of our state. I will now turn it over to my colleague Jordan Hoewischer to discuss more about the importance of H2Ohio.



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OFBF Operating Budget (HB 96) Priorities

H2Ohio:

- **Restore funding to as introduced levels for all relevant agencies (ODA, OEPA, ODNR) Amendment # SC0480**
- Ohio Farm Bureau has supported and continues to support the efforts of the H2Ohio initiative to promote water quality. The funding provided through H2Ohio is a tremendous example of tax dollars directly benefiting and serving the communities from which they originate. With momentum on the side of farmers, business owners, and local communities, the funding component for H2Ohio contained within the House version of HB 96 will hinder water quality efforts in Ohio and jeopardize the long-term success of the programs.

Workforce and Agricultural Education:

- **OSU Extension/Research (GRF 235511) Amendments SC1234/SC1235:** Restore funding to FY25 levels to ensure the critical missions of educating the public about agriculture in their communities as well as investing in research critical to our industry.
- **Fifth Quarter Fund (GRF 200545) Amendment # SC1194:** We support an additional \$1.2 million for the Agricultural 5th Quarter Project so that our agricultural educators can continue to provide exemplary opportunities for their students, inside and outside the classroom. This program provides a stipend to agricultural education teachers for work done with students outside of the normal school day as well as during the summer months.
- **Career Awareness and Exploration Funding:** We request restoring the \$16.325M annually for hands-on career exposure through Career-Technical Planning Districts. The House cut this funding in its budget, and we seek restoration via amendment SC0534. This funding ensures access to career exploration in rural, urban, and suburban districts.

Land Use



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- **Brownfield Remediation (DEVCD40):** We support the House-passed appropriation of \$250 million for the Brownfield Remediation Program, which directs critical investment to these areas and protects Ohio farmland.
- **No Eminent Domain for Recreational Trails (LOCCD3):** We support the House-passed provision prohibiting eminent domain for recreational trails. The powers of eminent domain should only be in the hands of elected officials who can be held accountable for their decisions.
- **Local Land Use Plans (AGRCD4):** We highlight our support for a provision allocating \$500,000 per FY in the Soil and Water Division for grants to local governments to develop or update land use plans. This will help communities shape their futures and support surrounding industries. We encourage the General Assembly to further support such programs to preserve farmland through improved development planning that promotes community involvement and smart growth.

General Provisions:

- **Ethanol Tax Credit (AGRCD32):** We support the House-passed provision establishing the High Blend Ethanol Rebate Program, which will increase demand for Ohio corn and save consumers at the pump.
- **Animal Disease Diagnostic Lab/Poultry Inspection (GRF 700401/GRF 700415):** We humbly request an additional \$627,500 per FY for Animal Health and Poultry Inspection line items to provide additional resources to the Animal Disease Diagnostic Lab at ODA in light of the HPAI outbreak in Western Ohio (SC_136_1289).
- **OSU Veterinary Medicine (GRF 235569):** We support reverting to as-introduced funding levels for the Ohio State College of Veterinary Medicine supplement so that critical dollars are used to help the current shortage of large-animal veterinarians across Ohio.
- **Livestock Show and Sale Fund (AGRCD5):** We support the House-passed provision providing \$800k to support current and attract new livestock shows to the Ohio Expo Center and Ohio State Fair.