

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and other honorable members of the Senate Finance Committee. My name is Jordan Hoewischer, Director of Water Quality and Research with the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation (OFBF) and I am here to help offer support for restoring H2Ohio funding to the as introduced levels for all three agencies.

I was hired as our second dedicated water quality staff member 10 years ago as a direct result of the Toledo Water Crisis, and I have been focused on helping our farmers identify solutions to the water quality challenges in our state ever since. OFBF, along with the rest of the agricultural community, has gone above and beyond to help solve the water quality challenges of our state and has committed millions of dollars to water quality and nutrient management research, public outreach, and provided strong support of Governor DeWine's H2Ohio program.

In 2015, the agriculture industry also helped pass Senate Bill 1, which set guidelines on when farmers could apply nutrients in the Western Lake Erie Basin (WLEB) based on weather and soil conditions, creating possibly the most restrictive zone of nutrient application in the country. Even in the face of new regulations, nearly 1 in 2 farms in the WLEB have enrolled in H2Ohio, showcasing their desire to be proactive and continue to be the great stewards of their lands that they have been for generations.

In 2020, I spoke at every H2Ohio rollout meeting alongside the administration, to hundreds of farmers that showed up because of the broad support of the program. Since then, 3,200 farmers controlling 2.2 million acres have signed up for conservation practices and emphatically demonstrated how farmers will participate in logical, effective programs. If H2Ohio is cut to the proposed funding level, only 1,500 farmers and 1 million acres will be able to enroll, severely stunting the progress that Ohio farmers have made.

H2Ohio has been an extension and accelerant of the enormous progress made by our farmers over the decades. According to a research summary by The Ohio State University, farmers have reduced their fertilizer usage by 33%, while 65% of Ohio counties have decreasing trends in mean soil test phosphorus. The combined factors of increased yield, reduced fertilizer application, and better manure utilization led to a net removal of 8 pounds of phosphorus across all Ohio agricultural lands from 2003 to 2022. In other words, more phosphorus is coming out of the soil and captured in the harvested crops through crop production than the nutrients that farmers apply to their fields every year.

Heidelberg University, which operates the National Center for Water Quality Research and has an extensive tributary water testing program, stated last fall that the dissolved reactive phosphorus (DRP) going into Lake Erie has seen a slight downward trend over the past 5 years. DRP is the portion of phosphorus that is plant available and fuels algae growth in the lake. The downward trend in DRP is a momentous data point that demonstrates our farmers have helped make tremendous progress towards reducing phosphorus going into Lake Erie. However, this issue has been decades in the making and will continue to be reduced bit by bit with programs like H2Ohio.

Hampering this momentum with a cut in funding will send even more uncertainty to our farmers, amid one of the most volatile ag economies we have ever seen. Ohio farmers are affected by heavy rains, markets they can't control, drought, high inputs, unstable trade partners, and extreme public pressure to reduce nutrients going into Lake Erie. The latter is slowly but surely being achieved with an extreme effort by our farmers, our partners in OACI, and the General Assembly, supporting great programs like H2Ohio. For multiple budget cycles,

farmers have been able to hang their hat on stable conservation funding to help propel them to move up the conservation ladder and try new practices that may be difficult to afford. We would ask that you restore the proposed H2Ohio funding amount to keep the momentum going. Evan and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.