Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, ranking member Senator Hicks Hudson and Members of the Committee, my name is Matt Fisher and I am Vice President of Lake Erie Foundation. I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you about the importance of restoring the budget for H2Ohio, specifically restoring the budget for ODNR and ODA for fields and areas in Northwest Ohio.

Lake Erie Foundation is passionate about supporting and improving the water quality of Lake Erie. Not only do 11 million people get their drinking water from Lake Erie, but Lake Erie provides 20 billion dollars from tourism and recreation and also 131,000 jobs to the state which generates $2.5 Billion in tax revenue. It is critical that we maintain the H2Ohio budget at the Executive Version so that we can keep both these economic dollars and our beautiful natural resource, Lake Erie healthy.

The Lake Erie Foundation's board consists of business leaders primarily from businesses along Lake Erie. We understand the pressures on expenses and budget cuts. However, we do not know why the H2Ohio budget was cut — as the western basin of Lake Erie is still declared impaired. There have been small water quality improvements, yet cutting the budget now will significantly damage any progress that has been made in the last several years.

We appreciate the leadership that the Governor and General Assembly has shown in supporting H2Ohio over the last several years.

You may have heard that the water quality of Grand Lake St Mary's is improving due to the work of the agencies, the farmers involved, and the leadership of Theresa Dirksen. That work in Mercer County has been going on for 12-13 years.

ODNR has implemented an impressive 203 wetland projects throughout Ohio designed to absorb phosphorous. Most importantly, the agency has directed their focus to fields that are high in phosphorus, which have the greatest run-off into the Maumee and Sandusky Rivers. Ultimately, ODNR gets an impressive bang for their buck. ODNR has utilized a private/public approach to their installations, which has enabled their program to move quickly and be extremely effective.

Ohio Department of Agriculture

The agriculture H2Ohio program is 100% voluntary and was initially rolled out to 14 counties in NW Ohio. Since then, 43% of the fields in NW Ohio have volunteered to participate in implementing one of the 10 practices in H2Ohio. We appreciate the farmers who have stepped up to implement H2Ohio programs.

I say this respectfully: shifting H2Ohio funds away from NW Ohio to other parts of the state is not the most prudent or logical next step at this time. I cannot emphasize enough that our work in Northwest Ohio is not close to being finished. Once we know which practices work best, then perhaps we can look at how to implement these practices and projects throughout Ohio.

We understand the pressures to spread resources through the state, but it is essential to prove success in Northwest Ohio before we do that.

Again, I emphasize the economic aspect of Lake Erie in keeping finite state dollars focused to ensure that Ohio obtains a return on investment.

Lake Erie Foundation and key Lake Erie scientists that you have heard from or will hear from believe that a small percent of the fields in NW Ohio account for a significantly disproportionate amount of the phosphorus that ends up at the mouth of the Maumee leading to harmful algal blooms in Lake Erie.

Scientists agree that 10-13% of fields — these would be considered "high phosphorus or legacy" result in 35-50% of the runoff that ends up at the mouth of the Maumee. It is imperative that there is focus on these high phosphorus fields.

Because the Department of Agriculture H2Ohio program has been 100% volunteer, we believe that this has not attracted the fields that are high/old phosphorous.

There are several recent examples where a focus on high phosphorus fields has been effective; those will be in this written testimony, but I will not review when I testify orally.

1. Ohio State has nearly completed a project where Phosphorus filters were placed at the edge of high/old phosphorus fields. This study shows fields with a removal of 86% of DRP and 51% of DRP, well above the goal of 40% reduction. This Ohio State Phosphorus filter project is what has given our group – Lake Erie Foundation-- the confidence that our project will be successful, and we are hoping that our project will serve as a template on how to focus on high phosphorus fields.

2. As part of H2Ohio, in 2021 Lake Erie Foundation helped sponsor a pilot study at Shallow Run—about 20 miles west of Upper Sandusky -- to accelerate the adoption of practices within a NW Ohio sub watershed to measure which practices and programs are most effective in reducing run off or managing water that is running off agriculture fields. We are already seeing improvements against the control watershed and are gaining a good understanding of which practices are most effective.

3. This has been discussed several times in the last week, but 14 years ago Grand Lake St Mary's was declared impaired. After significant effort and coordination from an

incredible engineer in Mercer County, Theresa Dirkson, and the predominately livestock farmers in the watershed, there has been an implementation of practices that have reduced the runoff from the fields and dramatically improved water quality running into GLSM.

One potential solution to addressing high phosphorous fields is to increase focus and attention on installing phosphorous filters at the edge of field. This practice is relatively non-invasive and focuses on managing water flow. In June 2024, the General Assembly allocated to the Lake Erie Foundation a grant of $500,000 from the One-Time Strategic Community Improvement Fund (OTSCIF) to be used towards a project that involves installing Phosphorus filters at the edge of high phosphorus fields in NW Ohio. This project is located in the Defiance/Napoleon area. This initiative is on schedule, and we are hopeful that this project will demonstrate an efficient method to manage water on fields and capture nutrient run off, resulting in less phosphorus in the Maumee. I want to highlight that the farmers that are participating in this project have been outstanding and eager to help, as also has been the crop consultant who helped us locate the high phosphorus fields.

Conclusion

We do believe that Ohio EPA's H2Ohio budget has been effective in improving drinking water in key cities across the state and should stay intact.

Lake Erie Foundation urgently requests that both ODNR and ODA's H2Ohio budget be restored, and we believe that a more significant part of ODA's budget should be directed to high phosphorus fields similar to how ODNR has focused so there is a better return on the H2Ohio investment. It would be detrimental to the long-term health of Lake Erie to remove funding from NW Ohio. Once we truly have a playbook for a high degree of successfully improving water quality then it makes sense to spread to other parts of Ohio. Thank you for your time and I welcome any questions you have.