



## **Testimony of National Wildlife Federation**

### **Presented to the Senate Finance Committee**

Gail Hesse, National Wildlife Federation

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Chairman Cirano, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 96. My name is Gail Hesse, and I am the Great Lakes Water Program Director for the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), America's oldest and largest conservation organization. Prior to joining NWF, I spent a 32-year career with the State of Ohio working towards clean water. I served for more than 25 years with Ohio EPA's water programs, working in both regulatory and incentive-based programs and went on to serve as Executive Director of the Ohio Lake Erie Commission. Since coming to the National Wildlife Federation, I have been active in the programs and policies to address the critical water quality issues facing the Great Lakes. I serve on the board of the Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative.

I am here today to ask for your support to fully fund H2Ohio per Governor DeWine's requested budget. To put it simply, H2Ohio has been a game changer. Never before has Ohio seen dedicated, focused funding towards complicated, seemingly intractable water quality issues.

Two weeks ago, we heard Director Baldridge say in his testimony that now is not the time to step back. I agree. One reason is that the leading practice funded by H2Ohio is the development of voluntary nutrient management plans. These plans provide a "prescription" that is tailored to the individual operations of a given farm. Farmers that have adopted this practice are committed to managing their fields, and crop yields, while protecting water quality. I believe we are at a precipice of seeing accelerated nutrient reduction **if** we can fund the implementation of the conservation practices outlined in these plans. We should not abandon these farmers that are committed to nutrient management but need the cost share assistance of the H2Ohio program.

We need to continue the investment made in the wetlands program. Ohio has many different types of wetlands, and they can all play a critical role in both nutrient and water management. The Lake Erie Aquatic Research Network was formed specifically to learn what works and what doesn't with wetlands and nutrient management. We need to learn the conditions under which wetlands can absorb nutrients, "be a sink" and under what conditions might they leak nutrients and become "a source". Ohio has a group of scientists collaborating, and not competing, for limited dollars to answer these questions.

In addition to requesting restoring funding for the H2Ohio program, I also respectfully request the Committee remove the prohibition against using H2Ohio funds for the acquisition of public lands and easements. These incentives, paid to willing sellers, help protect the state's long-term investment in conservation for future generations. H2Ohio's public-private partnerships leverage state, federal, and corporate dollars, magnifying the benefit to Ohioans.

Ohio remains the third highest state in the U.S. with the most lead service lines for drinking water. And 31% of all household sewage treatment systems are experiencing some degree of failure and potentially discharging untreated sewage into our waterways. The need is great, and Ohio EPA is appropriately directing funding towards these unmet needs where little to no other funding is available.

I applaud the program design and delivery by the three leading agencies. And yes, course corrections are always needed, and Ohio has committed to adaptive management to meet its nutrient reduction goals for Lake Erie. Ohio needs to stay the course with this signature program and not step back as we learn from what has been done to date so we can optimize and accelerate our progress towards water quality improvement.

Chairman Cirino and Members of the Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on HB 96.

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