



Western Reserve Land Conservancy

land • people • community

May 30, 2025

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Finance Committee, thank you for allowing me to provide testimony today on Substitute House Bill 96. My name is Rich Cochran and I am the President and CEO of Western Reserve Land Conservancy (WRLC). WRLC is an accredited land trust serving to permanently protect natural assets in 29 Northeast Ohio counties. We work on the ground in our communities and with local governments to identify land in need of protection and public access.

We were thrilled in 2019 to start using the H2Ohio program to address water quality issues. Before the program started, there was a huge void on how to combat ongoing algae blooms and provide clean water through Ohio's waterways. WRLC has completed or assisted with over ten H2Ohio projects since the program's inception. As a land trust, we steward these properties in perpetuity ensuring conservation practices stay in place.

Over that last several budgets, we have appreciated the General Assembly's support of the H2Ohio program. Strides have been made to reduce nutrient runoff and other contaminants from flowing into our waterways and Lake Erie. We have seen a historic investment to address the algae blooms in Lake Erie and with the passage of the H2Ohio Rivers Initiative last General Assembly, funding has been going out across the entire state. Though, there is still work to be done to address PFAS-contaminated rivers and other hazards.

It was a shock for us and many in the conservation community to see a provision added in the House passed version of the operating budget to prohibit H2Ohio funds from being used to purchase land or conservation easements (DNRCD34). The purchase of land and conservation easements is essential to ensure an H2Ohio property will promote clean water and sustain wildlife habitat forever.

The importance of land acquisitions and easements goes beyond the impact on water quality and wildlife habitats. By preserving natural habitats and waterways, the H2Ohio program supports activities like hunting and fishing which contributes billions of dollars to the state's economy. The proximity to public spaces and protected lands can result in higher property values for residents. Land acquisitions can create and retain jobs in construction, services, recreation, and eco-tourism. They can also leverage private business investment such as Intel's investment in a wetland project in Muskingum County.

According to U.S. Congressional Research Service, Ohio ranks 44 out of 50 states in publicly accessible land, with 4.2% of land in Ohio opened to the public. To compare, our neighbors to the north in Michigan rank 15th in the country with 28.1% public land. If anything, we should be promoting public access as a state rather than deterring it.

Without the ability to permanently protect land using H2Ohio funds, many of the economic effects may not happen and the State's initial H2Ohio investment will only be temporary. I urge you to amend this provision to allow H2Ohio funds to be used to purchase land and conservation easements. At the very least, allow nonprofits the ability to purchase land or conservation easements. Thank you, Chairman Cirino and members of the Finance Committee, for your time and consideration.