



Good afternoon, Chairman Cirino and members of the Senate Finance Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this written testimony as an interested party on House Bill 96, the FY2026-27 biennial budget.

The Coalition of Ohio Land Trusts (COLT) was organized in 2004 to help serve the state's land trusts by providing a centralized source of information, a shared network of resources and experts, and statewide meetings for professional development, education, and training. We work to advance critical state and federal land conservation policy initiatives and legislation, such as property tax reform, and renewal of the Clean Ohio Fund, in partnership with other statewide groups. We are a network of about 30 organizations dedicated to advancing land conservation for the benefit of the public in Ohio.

COLT urges the Senate to support the Governor's proposed funding for H2Ohio and remove the requirement that funds not be used to acquire conservation easements or land. As amended by the House, H2Ohio funding was cut by 47%, which will drastically hamper the great progress the state has made in improving water quality and the provision to not protect the land in the long run leaves the state's financial investment vulnerable.

Ohio is blessed with abundant water resources, which comes with a duty to care for this precious resource. Healthy, expansive water resources lead to much needed economic growth by attracting businesses, industry and recreation to the area. In fact, according to a study conducted by The Ohio State University in 2022, recreational activities along the Little Miami River in southwest Ohio, alone, bring in \$10 million annually to the region. Also in 2022, hunting and fishing related activities contributed nearly \$12.5 billion to the state's economy, supporting nearly 80,000 jobs and generating \$4 billion in income. All of Ohio's primary industries, be it technology, manufacturing, or agriculture, depend on abundant clean water to succeed and grow.

H2Ohio projects, across the state are also providing critical infrastructure benefits, such as flood control, nutrient absorption, and stormwater runoff reduction. Creating or restoring 16,000 acres of wetlands, protecting 1,400 acres of high quality riparian corridor and enrolling 2.2 million acres of farmland into best management practices is doing the work more efficiently and effectively than human developed solutions could do to protect infrastructure.

To complete these projects, local contractors, professionals, and service providers are being employed, yet another way this program is investing in our communities. And because ODNR's Environmental Covenants are being used to protect the land and the state's financial investment in that land, these properties remain privately owned and managed, and stay on the tax rolls. H2Ohio is a win for the state, the local community, and the landowners because it is protecting

the very best land and water resources in Ohio, while protecting Ohio's #1 industry – agriculture.

Unfortunately, in response to the House budget cuts, H2Ohio has already paused funding to the Ohio River Basin watershed and is focusing its efforts solely on the Lake Erie watershed. This is a huge loss for the majority of the state and the 41 past applicants to H2Ohio when many beneficial projects were being planned for the next funding round. It is a loss to those communities who may have been counting on projects to improve drinking water, boost agricultural production, or expand recreational opportunities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony as an interested party in HB 96. We must act now to protect Ohio's most important natural resource and reap the wide range of benefits clean water will provide for our great state for generations to come.

Respectfully,

Ellie Ewing and Michele Burns

Co-chairs of the Coalition of Ohio Land Trusts