

## **Ohio Senate Finance Committee HB 96 (2026-2027 Biennium Budget) Testimony**

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Thank you, Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and the Members of the Senate Finance Committee for the opportunity to provide this written testimony in support restoring full funding for the H2Ohio grant program in the 2026-2027 budget. My name is Mark Dilley, and I have a long history with wetlands that has prompted me to share this testimony. I received my undergraduate degree in natural resources from The Ohio State University with a specialization in fisheries management. Through this major, I became increasingly interested in the health of our waterways, which led to an interest in wetlands and their role as “kidneys of the landscape.”

I returned to OSU to pursue my Master’s degree in Environmental Science with an emphasis on wetlands, studying the fate and transport of the herbicide atrazine at the Olentangy River Wetland Research Park started by Dr. Bill Mitsch (whose leadership and voice we lost this past February – I am certain he would also be providing supportive testimony were he still with us). In 1998, my wife, Chris, and I started the Westerville-based ecological and wetland consulting firm, MAD Scientist Associates, where we strive to Make A Difference - *through science, service, and education*.

When Dr. Mitsch left OSU for a new position with Florida Gulf Coast University in the spring of 2011, I was tapped to take on a “temporary” role as lecturer for the Wetland Ecology & Restoration course. That temporary position ended 13 years later with the hiring of a full-time professor who is taking over the course this fall. During my time at OSU, I was also elected to the board of the Ohio Wetlands Association where I have served as President for the past nine years before hitting my term limit last year. In March, I was elected as a Member-at-Large for the recently-formed Ohio Ecological Restoration Association (OHERA).

In all of these roles, I have been directly involved in communicating about wetlands, their history, and their ecological and societal value. Of note is the fact that we live in a state that has lost over 90% of its wetlands. As a result, we must contend with issues of flooding, harmful algal blooms (HABs), and many other repercussions. Ohio is not alone in having these issues. In fact, the United Nations has identified the need for restoration of natural ecosystems, especially wetlands, across the globe, declaring this the Decade on Restoration.

Under the leadership of Governor DeWine and his agency directors with ODNR, Ohio EPA, and the Department of Agriculture, Ohio has led the way in implementing wetland restoration

projects and related best management practices to protect and improve the health of our state's waters. I tout this program at every chance I get, and I want to wholeheartedly thank our elected officials for their past and present support of the H2Ohio program, which has been the best thing to happen to wetlands in our state since the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972.

The well-constructed H2Ohio program has successfully hard-wired accountability and opportunities for scientific discovery into the wetland restoration process by queueing up research on the efficacy of the myriad projects through the Lake Erie Aquatic Research Network, a consortium of Ohio colleges and universities. Through this third-party research, academics, agency project managers, and restoration practitioners and partners around the state are learning what design elements yield the best return on investment in terms of nutrient removal and general water quality improvements.

In addition, the available funding and resulting demand for restoration services has enabled our small business to grow and create more jobs. More importantly, this funding source is making a difference for Ohioans who benefit from cleaner water, reduced HABs, improved flood control and groundwater recharge, more abundant wildlife habitat, and active and passive recreational opportunities.

In a state that is experiencing rapid growth and unprecedented development, this funding source has been a "game changer" in that it has served as a catalyst for wetland restoration that is not tied to wetland loss (as is the case for wetland mitigation). It has also allowed for funds to be invested in land acquisition, a practice that I believe should be continued as we strategically chart our course into the future.

Continuing the H2Ohio program and restoring funding to the requested levels for the next budget cycle will be extremely beneficial to help balance the demands we will be placing on our environment as population growth and economic expansion continues in the Great State of Ohio. If you have any questions, please call me at 614-531-9156. I thank you for your consideration of these comments, and hope that you are as supportive as I am to see this program fully funded.

Best Regards,



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