

Office of the Lucas County Engineer

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June 4, 2025

Hon. Jerry Cirino, Chair
Hon. Brian Chavez, Vice Chair
Hon. Paula Hicks-Hudson, Ranking Member
Finance Committee
The Ohio Senate

Re: Interested Party Testimony of Mike Pniewski, P.E., P.S.
Substitute House Bill 96 – State Operating Budget

Dear Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to present testimony as an interested party to the State Operating Budget Substitute House Bill 96 (Sub. H.B. 96).

I speak before you today to urge you to include funding for a dedicated **H2Ohio Ash Tree Removal Grant Program** to the operating budget, with a request to add \$15 million over the two-year period for this purpose to the Department of Agriculture. As Lucas County Engineer, I am responsible for administering log jam removal for ditches that are under petition maintenance under Section 6131 and Section 6137 of the Ohio Revised Code. Over that past 5 to 10 years, the amount of log jams that are present in our waterways have increased greatly to the point they are becoming a larger and larger burden on landowners who are responsible for paying for log jam removal through assessment on their property tax bills.

These log jams are the largely the direct result of the mass die off of ash trees that were killed by the invasive emerald ash borer. Introduced to the area from China from shipping pallets, over the past 20 years the borer has devastated our forests and killed one of the major trees that exist along our riparian corridors. Now, about 10 years after the trees were killed, rotting branches and logs are falling into our rivers and watercourses, and creating log jams of increasing size and severity. As shown in previous testimony, this is an issue we are facing in all 88 counties and is creating a higher and higher burden on the governmental agencies and landowners who are left to clean up the slow devastation log jams create.

These log jams obstruct water flow, increase flooding risk, and make routine ditch maintenance more costly and dangerous. A grant program to assist counties and other units of government with safe removal of ash debris would directly benefit public safety, environmental quality, and stormwater management.

Landowners and units of government are increasingly having difficulty in managing the financial cost to manage a problem that did not cause and is not due to a natural progression of events. No unit of government, and especially no landowner, is prepared to bear the cost to remove thousands of dead ash from our rivers, creeks, ditches, and watercourses. Unfortunately, this provision was not included in the House budget or in the Substitute Bill 96 accepted by the Committee on June 3, 2025. We respectfully ask the Senate to consider it a priority and include it as an amendment to the Sub Bill in the final Senate version of the operating budget.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify in as an interested party to Sub. House Bill 96.

Yours very truly,

Mike Pniewski, P.E., P.S.
Lucas County Engineer