

**Ohio House Finance Committee
Proponent Testimony
House Bill 643**

**Tracy Freeman, The Nature Conservancy in Ohio
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Chairman Smith, Vice Chair Ryan, Ranking Member Cera, and members of the House Finance Committee: I am Tracy Freeman, Government Relations Director for The Nature Conservancy in Ohio. We appreciate this opportunity to testify as a proponent of HB 643, a bill to provide additional state resources to enhance water quality in Lake Erie.

The Nature Conservancy is a non-partisan, science-based organization that seeks to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. We work collaboratively with businesses, farmers, sportsmen groups, government and local communities to develop pragmatic, market-based solutions to conservation challenges, including water quality. More than 65,000 Ohioans are Nature Conservancy supporters.

We greatly appreciate the steps that Governor Kasich and the Ohio General Assembly have already taken to address the threats posed by excessive nutrient loading in our waterways to drinking water, public health, recreation, tourism, property values, and quality of life. SB 1, SB 150, and appropriations for programs like the Healthy Lake Erie Initiative in the biennial capital budget are good examples. Yet, the Nutrient Mass Balance Study, released by Ohio EPA in April, tells us that more needs to be done.

To be most effective with a problem of this scale, public funding must (1) address the root causes of the problem and not merely treat the symptoms; (2) be targeted to where the problem is most acute and not be spread too thin; and (3) be sustained over time. HB 643 addresses the first two criteria.

In particular, the bill would increase the capacity of the Soil & Water Conservation Districts by making another \$3.5 million in General Revenue Funds available. These funds would support county soil and water conservation districts in the Western Lake Erie Basin for staffing and to assist in soil testing, nutrient management plan development, enhanced filter strips and water management, and other conservation support. The Soil & Water Conservation Districts disseminate information and serve as a critical resource to farmers in all 88 counties. Increasing their capacity is a good investment.

In addition, the bill would appropriate another \$20 million in capital funds for phosphorus reduction programs in the Western Lake Erie Basin. These programs would include capital funds for purchasing of equipment for subsurface placement of nutrients into the soil, equipment for nutrient placement based on GIS soil testing and variable rate technology, water



management efforts, manure conversion technologies, additional tributary monitoring, and edge-of-field drainage structures. Importantly, the funds would be targeted with priority given to sub-watersheds in the basin determined to be highest in total phosphorus and dissolved reactive phosphorus loading.

The bill would also double the amount of funding available under the Healthy Lake Erie Initiative to help the state end open-lake disposal of dredged material by 2020. The Nature Conservancy supports the reuse of dredged material in ways that would provide additional water quality improvements and create fish and wildlife habitat such as the creation of natural infrastructure in places like Maumee and Sandusky Bays to filter water flowing into the Western Lake Erie Basin. Our recommendation is that some funding from the bill be used to expand Ohio's use of long-lasting natural infrastructure to improve water quality.

Finally, the bill would provide funding for Ohio Sea Grant/Stone Laboratory at The Ohio State University to improve its ability to conduct in-lake monitoring. The additional monitoring would help us measure progress made in reducing nutrient levels, especially in the open lake.

In conclusion, we appreciate the down payment that HB 643 would make in terms of increased funding for Lake Erie water quality. We hope that the General Assembly will prioritize a long-term funding stream for water-quality issues in Ohio. A few years ago, The Nature Conservancy participated in the development of the Healthy Water Ohio report, which included representatives from agriculture, academia, the environment, tourism, and others. The report called for sustained funding over time to enhance our state's water quality. We look forward to working with the General Assembly and Administration to continue to make progress for the benefit of all Ohioans.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify as a proponent on HB 643. I would be happy to try to answer any questions.

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