



*Conserving Ohio's Natural Heritage.*

Before the House Ways and Means Committee

Representative Merrin Chair

Proponent testimony of Steven N. Berk, MPH

Co-chair

Coalition of Ohio Land Trusts

March 17, 2021



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Chairman Merrin, Vice Chair Riedel, Ranking Member Sobecki, and members of the House Ways and Means Committee, my name is Steven Berk, Director of Public Policy for Western Reserve Land Conservancy and honored to serve as co-chair for the Coalition of Ohio Land Trusts. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 19.

The Coalition of Ohio Land Trusts is comprised of over 40 nonprofit land trusts around the state. Our member organizations work to conserve natural areas and working farms. By partnering with farmers, landowners, and government agencies we are able to successfully sequester nutrients, prevent erosion, and restore functioning wetlands along rivers, lakes, and streams. We are part of a larger community at the forefront of the state's water quality efforts.

Ohio land trusts appreciate the work of this committee on Senate Bill 19, which has a timely and impactful response to address the state's water quality issues. The bill strategically ensures economic development and natural resource management. Additionally, an amendment was added in the Senate Ways and Means Committee that specifies that H2Ohio projects are included in the tax-exempt status. We supported this amendment and applaud the Senate for a swift and unanimous passage of the bill.

Wetland creation and restoration are proven strategies to improving water quality and protecting critical wildlife habitat and fish nurseries. Furthermore, we believe Senate Bill 19 and the H2Ohio amendment will yield tremendous benefits to Ohio's agriculture and tourist industries. Supporting efforts to improve water quality throughout the state is essential for economic growth and job creation. One in seven Ohioans are employed in the agriculture sector and Lake Erie tourism accounts for \$15.1 billion in tourism-related economic impact.

More than 90% of Ohio's wetlands are gone and as a result, we have seen degraded water resources, most notably the Maumee watershed, which drains into western Lake Erie. However, through wetland mitigation and the state's investment in H2Ohio funding, Ohio's conservation and agriculture communities are producing positive results based on scientific data and implementation of best management practices.

Senate Bill 19 bolsters these efforts by codifying wetland tax-exempt status for 501(c)(3) organizations working in conservation and will allow Ohioans and tourists to see continued success in this area.

Thank you Chairman Merrin and members of the House Ways and Means Committee for the opportunity to voice our support of Senate Bill 19. We encourage its favorable passage. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Respectfully submitted,

Steven N. Berk

Coalition of Ohio Land Trusts

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