

Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative Information Session

Ohio Senate Agriculture and Natural Resource Committee

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Chairman Schaeffer, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the committee, thank you for allowing us the opportunity to present before you today. My name is Janelle Mead and I am CEO of the Ohio Federation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts as well as the Administrator of the Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative.

You have heard Scott and Heather talk about the creation of OACI and partnership of our members – but I don't think that can be underscored enough. As you listen to the comments provided by our team today, you will see a screen representing our member organizations. Please look carefully. Every organization on there has water quality as a primary issue. And every organization comes at the issue from a different perspective – and yet we have found a way to work together to create a meaningful program.

The board brings together 11 directors – five of which are farmer members. Our farmers come from around the state, but several are located in the Western Lake Erie Basin. We have three leaders from



agricultural organizations, representing row-crop and livestock farming and three leaders from non-governmental organizations, which are our environmental partners.

We have two staff members –Nikki Hawk who is the OACI Project Leader and me. We both work for the Ohio Federation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

As our co-leads describe the OACI process, they are split into two arms or focal points of the program. And while they sound very similar and inventory many of the same practices, they are very different. One is assessment, a random, statistically-valid survey of farmer practices in a given HUC-8 watershed. Currently, there is no single source for determining the adoption of conservation practices. Further, there is no tool that takes into consideration practices that farmers voluntarily put into place – and believe me – a lot of farmers are, and have been doing, great things, on their own, with no public assistance. In addition, farmers have been participating in programs with the help of our NGO partners – also which are not typically quantified. Kris Swartz will speak to you more about our assessment program.

The second arm of OACI is certification. Certification is a voluntary reporting of farmer practices. Farmer can dial into our app and give us an understanding of the programs and practices used on their farm. As leaders in the agriculture and environmental communities, this will give us an idea of areas that have a



lot of positive activity going on -- and maybe counties or areas that need some encouragement. Maybe we need to host a farmer meeting, put some effort into social meeting or a training, or work with our conservation districts or extension educators to help farmers get more information in that area. By looking at the data self-selected by farmers we can determine what resources farmers in a given area need. It will also help recognize those voluntary practices that farmers are already doing. And help us to better tell the story of the work they are doing. Jessica D'Ambrosio and Jordan Howischer will explain more about how our certification process works.

From the instant this process started, making the connection to the Federation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts and the OACI group made a lot of sense. Districts are in each of Ohio's 88 counties and around the state have more than 400 employees. For 77 years now, soil and water districts have encouraged farmers to try new things and have given them the education and the tools to adopt new conservation practices. We have been the boots on the ground, that are engaged in every county and have relationships with farmers. And farmers see our district staff as trusted resources – they know their stuff when it comes to conservation practices and what works best in their given areas.

But we as a Federation and Districts would need great partners to encourage farmers to come to the table and walk through our doors. We needed the agriculture commodity organizations. In the winter of 2020, the commodity organizations listed on these slides bombarded farmers with invitations to attend meetings for H2Ohio. I am not sure I know any farmer who received a single invitation. Most received



multiple postcards, electronic newsletters, social media postings, and new stories featuring some of our favorite people. Farmers were encouraged to go to the meetings, register with OACI and if you were asked for assessment –answer the questions. The network of farmers the commodity organizations brought to the table was astounding. When you talk to the districts, the people who have attended meetings, registered for programs are some of the faces we have seen before, but many are new faces eager to try something different. We were able to reach them through the network provided by the commodity organizations, our website and the app (available in the app store and on Google Play). Our partners came together once again to communicate the expansion of H2Ohio into 10 new counties and were once again helpful in bringing farmers to the table to learn more about the programs available to them.

The partnership with H2Ohio has been essential in helping to get farmers to enroll in our certification program. Farmers needed to enroll in the first year – which gave us some basic information in how to communicate with them and will need to certify through the app or website in the second year of the program. The certification process encourages farmers to think about the conservation practices on their farm – but H2Ohio gives the funding and ability to make a change. Together, these programs help us get a better understanding of engagement in conservation practices and a tremendous toolbox to make a difference.

While 14 soil and water districts have been working with the H2Ohio program, a smaller number of



districts (7) were engaged in the assessment portion. Their work is sincerely appreciated. Not only did they help identify the farmers attached to the parcels, but they also know and understand the practices and the questions that were being asked. Some of the questions are technical and can be interpreted differently on paper. But the trained technicians in the district offices worked with the farmers to ensure our questions were answered accurately.

We have talked a lot about certification and assessment – and now I would like for you to hear from the folks who have championed our way through these efforts. I would ask that Jessica D’Ambrosio and Jordan Howesher come forward.

Kris Swartz

Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the committee, thank you for allowing us the opportunity to present before you today. My name is Kris Swartz. I am a farmer from Wood county, past-president of the Ohio Federation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts and currently the Chair of the Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative.

In the two arms of OACI, I am going to talk about the assessment. The key things to remember about assessment is that it is:

- 1) Random
- 2) Statistically valid



- 3) Field-specific, not whole farm
- 4) Confidentiality is key

OACI worked with soil and water conservation district offices to contact farmers and answer questions based on the individual field selected. By having trained staff enter the data we are hopeful this eliminates any confusion and will give us an accurate snapshot of conservation practices. We also wanted to make sure farmers knew we would keep their data confidential. There is a high trust factor in both the districts and The Ohio State University from farmers and they felt comfortable sharing information with these entities.

We completed our first round of assessment in the first quarter of the year. We are currently analyzing the data with Ohio State and hope to release the numbers very soon.

Many people want to know what is next and we have determined our future assessment schedule, doing two assessments each year. The schedule is on the slides, but we do plan to return to the Lower Maumee in 2024.

Up on the screen now you will see the questions we asked during process. We broke our questions into two categories – practices and consideration (which means those things that you can change more frequently – year to year) or structural (those items which are more permanent in nature).



Farmers received a call or a visit from a district technician that asked them questions on the field that was selected. Our goal to be statistically-valid was 375 farmers, but we ended up surveying more than 450.

This process was random, so we collected CAUV lists from auditors in the counties that were apart of the watershed. Consulting with the Center for Survey Statistics and Methodology at Iowa State to determine the appropriate ratios to be reflective of the watershed.

We hope to be able to share the results of this assessment with you very soon.

Before I leave the podium, I want to share a little bit about what is going on in Northwest Ohio and how it effects the things we do with surveys in assessment and evaluations in certification. Going into harvest, I would have had cover crops on almost all of my acres. That was the plan. The purchases were made and my participation was nailed down in H2Ohio. But Mother Nature has other things in mind. The picture on the left is what my cover crop fields look like now, and the picture on the right is what we would like to see.

I hope to get some cover crops planted but first I will need to get my 2021 crops harvested. The rain wasn't great last week, it was horrible over the weekend and it is not looking too good for this week. I am very thankful that our state H2Ohio programs are flexible and provided an extension for all farmers



in my area. While it is ideal that cover crops are planted in October, planting them in November is still better than not planting them at all. Our plans with agriculture and conservation have to shift and evolve – and my guess is over time we will see some shifting in the numbers – because farmers can't always do the things we want to do.

I would now like to turn it over to my friend, Jeff Duling, who is going to talk more about the farmers perspective of OACI.

Jeff Duling

Good afternoon Chairman Schaffer, Vice-Chair Huffman and Ranking Member Fedor. My name is Jeff Duling. I am a farmer from Putnam County. I have row crops, hogs and some beef cattle. I am a supervisor for Putnam SWCD and the First Vice-President of the Ohio Federation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts. As you can see from the video TNC produced, my family has been farming for generations in northwest Ohio. We have tried to be good conservationists and stewards of the land. At our farm, we like to try new things. Sometimes they work, sometimes we know what we are not doing next year, but always there is a good conversation at the coffee shop. And this year there has been a lot of talk at the coffee shop – mostly because we just can't stop the rain.

Currently farmers in northwest Ohio are governed by two pieces of legislation that influence farming practices. The first SB1, limits the application of manure on frozen and snow-covered ground. We are



also required to be certified to apply nutrients under SB 150. These pieces of legislation have encouraged us to be more knowledgeable and prepare for unforeseen circumstances when applying manure. While we are always at the mercy of mother nature, we can, and should be more prepared. In addition to what is required of us, many go the extra mile, with additional manure storage and incorporation. These are just good practices and are largely adopted by farmers in the basin.

For the last decade there have been questions about the silver bullet that will solve all of our problems – and I think we all know there isn't one. We hear a lot of conversation about stopping some production practices, but what we really need is to make each and every farmer better. We need to use our nutrients wisely and put practices in place that improve soil health and limit runoff. The combination of the work in OACI and H2Ohio does that.

I have been asked what exactly OACI is asking farmers to do and why it matters – and I am going to give you my answer, from a farmer's perspective.

With OACI certification, we are asking farmers to think about their farming operation. And that is pretty much it. It took me about 8 minutes to complete my farmer certification and that included downloading the app on my iPad. They don't have to dig through records, they don't have to look for sophisticated answers, but I do hope that as they go through the questions they ask themselves, could I do more? Is there another way I can make a difference?



And let's face it, sometimes it is good to get a grade. Sometimes it is good to know how I stack up compared to everyone else. And sometimes it is good to be a winner. My score was 182.62/200. We need to know our score so we know where we can do more. My wife works at the school – she said I passed, and I got an A. But I am going to go through my score and I am going to work at getting a 200/200, because we should all be in a state of continual improvement. And also, I want to make sure Kris Swartz never has a higher score than I do. But my score will probably change next year because some of our practices are weather dependent. And right now, my friend Kris and I are hosting a biggest loser contest, updating each other daily on the amount of rain we are getting.

Certification information will help us identify those areas where we may need extra effort in encouraging farmers to adopt conservation practices. In short, it gives us the information to help us help more farmers to become better farmers.

As far as assessment goes, our Putnam SWCD participated in part of the assessment. We had a small number of parcels and none of my farmland was included. I asked if the staff could go through the questions with me. It took about five minutes. Not a heavy lift for a farmer – but the value in the data we are gathering is significant. There is no other source that allows us to quantify the information in this region on conservation practices that farmers are both voluntarily putting on their ground as well as those where they receive assistance.

None of us or our organizations could do this alone. There is farmer credibility in the program because our commodity organizations are apart of this work. We trust them and trust that they have assembled



a team that is asking the right questions and will protect our data. Our environmental partners have been at the table through this process – and we are helping them to get answers to the questions that make a meaningful difference in all of our work.

The partnership between OACI and H2Ohio gives farmers the ability to understand how their practices can make an impact and a difference and H2Ohio gives them the resources to help make improvements.

I am also signed up for practices through the H2Ohio program. Now I am going to be honest. I have always applied nutrients according to my soil tests and I am on third or fourth set of nutrient management plans – so some of the basics I was already doing. I also had cover crops on much of my acreage – but here is where H2Ohio has made a difference. I am very aware of cover crop planting dates – and frankly I am very aware of the difference in makes when those seeds are planted earlier. I am experimenting with interceding. I am trying new things. I probably wouldn't have tilled my acreage as some of my neighbors did – but I am taking some of my practices to the next level.

When this group testified in the House this past summer I had said that I would get my cover crops in earlier and all of my acreage would be covered. Well, that's not going to happen. As I mentioned earlier, the rain has been relentless. There is no way to plant my cover crops, because I can't get in the fields to harvest. In an ideal world, covers would have been planted by the 15th, but I am thankful that we were able to work with the Ohio Department of Agriculture and get an extension on that date to November 1 for farmers in our area. And I am hopeful that the rain will subside and we can still get something



planted but November 1 seems optimistic right now. I appreciate the flexibility in H2Ohio as a state-managed program that can make adjustments that work for farmers and conservation. H2Ohio has given me the ability to try some new things and expand on those practices that I know will work.

