

**Ohio Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
October 26, 2021**

**Informal remarks regarding the Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative
Scott Higgins, CEO of the Ohio Dairy Producers Association
and
Heather Taylor-Miesle, Executive Director of the Ohio Environmental Council**

Scott Higgins:

Good morning Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee. I am Scott Higgins, CEO of the Ohio Dairy Producers Association.

Heather Taylor-Miesle:

And I am Heather Taylor-Miesle, Executive Director of the Ohio Environmental Council.

Scott Higgins:

On behalf of the agriculture, conservation, and environmental community, we stand before you, demonstrating unity in a proactive, collaborative approach to improving Ohio's waterways and lakes. Making significant advancements for the state's water quality meant thinking differently. As a result, a revolutionary partnership formed between unlikely organizations typically at opposite ends of the water issue spectrum. Setting aside long-term animosity, we stopped arguing and came together to make a real impact for Ohio.

In July of 2018, Heather and I agreed to meet and discuss how we might find some common ground and a way to work together rather than being at war. After a few hours of honest and sincere conversation over "milk and cookies" it became clear to both of us that we needed to break out of the historical battle and begin to lead our respective organizations down a path that could lead to collaboration and a results-oriented approach to improving Ohio's waterways.

Heather Taylor-Miesle:

Let us be clear. While we do not agree on everything, we did agree to draw a line in the sand and begin by openly and transparently reviewing the facts and science surrounding our challenges. We undoubtedly agreed that farmers, and the organizations that represent farmers, all want a clean environment and are committed to identifying new and innovative ways to continue to grow and provide food while also reducing nutrient runoff from farming. It became undoubtedly clear that the costs associated with changing best management farming practices are extremely expensive. Without definitive science-based proof that these new practices work, it is a major obstacle for farmers to make that investment. Secondly, it is also a reality that we cannot make changes overnight. We must set mutually agreeable and achievable goals to work toward. Following our heart-to-heart conversation, we committed to gather all the stakeholders who would agree to work together and do so with the pledge of building trust, maintaining integrity, and making a full commitment. Following a series of meetings and a two-day retreat in April of 2019, the unimaginable occurred: we found common ground, set ground rules, committed to short term and long-term plans, and agreed to allow the science to be our guidance system while also making a serious commitment to rally our farm community to increase the adoption of best management farming practices.

Scott Higgins:

In addition, it was realized that many farmers are already doing the right things on their farms, but the story was untold. We must do a better job of identifying success, documenting the proof that farmers are already implementing significant conservation practices, and verifying and sharing the information publicly.

Heather Taylor-Miesle:

It was both extremely challenging and very rewarding for Scott and me to co-chair the stakeholder group that spent nearly two years working diligently to cast the vision, set the goals, put our shoulders together to build a plan, and to establish the organization – the Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative (OACI), which is charged with leading this collaborative effort.

OACI's mission is to achieve meaningful improvement of water quality in Ohio, assure the future viability of Ohio agriculture, and build widespread participation of farmers. While there is no silver bullet, we believe this unprecedented partnership will bring meaningful change to Ohio's water quality over time.

Scott Higgins:

We brought together diverse stakeholders to improve Ohio's water quality through measurement, education, and certification of Ohio's farmers. The support for implementation of on-farm conservation and nutrient management practices that are unique to each farm makes this initiative different from any other. We believe the partnership with H2Ohio will increase the participation by our farmers.

OACI was officially established in November 2019 and the board of directors met for the first time in February 2020. The board of directors is made up of unique balance of farmers, environmental and conservation groups, and agriculture organization leadership. We are also blessed with the commitment of university researchers, faculty, extension personnel, as well as state and federal agencies to help us be grounded in science and partner with us in delivering results that help us meet our goals in their capacity as the Scientific Advisory Committee. Please see the various organizations on the screen, however:

Members of the Agriculture Conservation Initiative include:

- American Farmland Trust
- Environmental Defense Fund
- Ohio AgriBusiness Association
- Ohio Cattlemen's Association
- Ohio Conservation Federation
- Ohio Corn and Wheat Growers Association
- Ohio Dairy Producers Association
- Ohio Environmental Council
- Ohio Farm Bureau Federation
- Ohio Federation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts
- Ohio Pork Council
- Ohio Poultry Association
- Ohio Sheep Improvement Association
- Ohio Soybean Council
- The Fertilizer Institute
- The Nature Conservancy

Members of the OACI Scientific Advisory Committee:

- The Ohio State University, College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences
- National Center for Water Quality Research at Heidelberg University
- Ohio Department of Agriculture
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Obviously, we are in our early phases of operation, and despite the setbacks caused by Covid-19, we are moving forward aggressively to partner with the H2Ohio program and recruiting farmers to participate and increase the adoption and implementation of proven best management farming practices. OACI embraces the

widespread work force of many organizations working directly with farmers. Our collaboration utilizes the talents and relationships of USDA's NRCS team, Ohio Soil and Water Conservation District County office personnel, technical service providers, crop consultants, and OSU's faculty, researchers and extension personnel, to name a few. You see, we have embraced and empowered the full force of a concerned and committed team of skilled individuals to work closely with farmers and to assist them in identifying opportunities for improvement and to provide guidance in making changes that will make the most impact in reaching our goals of improving Ohio's waterways.

We are most grateful to Governor DeWine for meeting with us in November of 2019 and for responding to our request for a public-private partnership to provide farmers with much needed funding and the full support of the Ohio Department of Agriculture and Ohio's state agencies.

Heather Taylor-Miesle:

In just a few moments, you will hear the details about OACI presented by Board Chair and farmer, Kris Swartz, OACI's CEO, Janelle Mead, and the team of subject matter experts who are leading the committees charged with implementing all our initiatives.

Today, we are so pleased to have The Ohio State University's Dean of the College of Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences to join us in delivering this update to you. We are extremely grateful for the commitment and enthusiasm that Dean Cathann Kress brought into our early conversations after we reached out to her and asked for OSU's support to work with us on our journey.