



Ohio Department of Natural Resources

MIKE DeWINE, GOVERNOR

MARY MERTZ, DIRECTOR

**Senate Finance
H2Ohio Testimony
Provided by Ohio Department of Natural Resources Director Mary Mertz
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Good afternoon Chairman Dolan, Vice-Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee. My name is Mary Mertz and I am the Director of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR). Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on our department's H2Ohio progress.

ODNR has made great strides as highlighted in the wetland map provided to committee members, and we are excited to continue that work alongside the Ohio Department of Agriculture and the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency. I am going to highlight a few great projects for you today to give you an idea of the work our H2Ohio team is doing.

Brooks Park Wetland Buckeye Lake

Buckeye Lake has had harmful algal blooms (HABs) nearly every year since 2010. When the toxic HABs are identified, ODNR posts a red sign warning people not to swim and explaining that the algae blooms can be dangerous to their health.

What was just an idea in 2019 —some red circles on an aerial photo around an oversized parking lot next to a stream and an empty grass field—is now the vibrant Brooks Park wetland at Buckeye Lake. The Brooks Park Wetland creates a 2.5-acre wetland complex and realigns 700 feet of Murphy's Run, a tributary stream that receives stormwater runoff from nearby farm fields. That runoff eventually flows into Buckeye Lake and can lead to harmful algal blooms (HABs). By redirecting the stream flow through the wetland, excess nutrients that can cause harm will be filtered out before water makes it to the lake. The project design team has modeled the expected annual nutrient reduction and we anticipate 784 pounds of phosphorous and 1,620 pounds of nitrogen removed from Murphy's Run each year as a result of this project. This wetland restoration project will help prevent HABs, providing more opportunities for citizens to enjoy everything Buckeye Lake has to offer.

Oakwoods Nature Preserve Projects

ODNR teamed up with Hancock Park District at Oakwoods Nature Preserve on two projects, which are located next to each other, covering 142 total acres.

The first project at Oakwoods Nature Preserve East sits in an agricultural field that was converted into a wetland to restore natural water flow. The wetland filters excess nutrient and sediment from nearby farmland before water flows into a ditch which then empties into Aurand Run. A small portion of this property will be planted as a native prairie for people to observe and enjoy.

The second project at Oakwoods Nature Preserve West retired marginal farmland to create and restore wetlands, woodland, and prairie. Aurand Run connects to a floodplain wetland during storm events allowing for extra filtering of nutrient-rich water. This project also enhances wooded habitat along the stream and enhances a nearby forested wetland. Jointly, we anticipate that these two projects will remove 682 pounds of phosphorous and 2,014 pounds of nitrogen annually from the Maumee River watershed.

The Oakwoods projects in the Western Lake Erie Basin were also the first place, in early Spring of 2021, where the researchers of the Lake Erie and Aquatic Research Network's Wetland Monitoring Team met in-person to field-test their methods to track the nutrient reduction performance of ODNR's H2Ohio wetlands. Their findings will be instrumental in shaping the future of our efforts.

Redhorse Bend Wetland Restoration

The 94-acre Redhorse Bend Wetland Restoration property is extremely important for capturing nutrients and for fish habitat, due to the loss of wetland floodplain habitat across much of Northwest Ohio. At this site, Black Swamp Conservancy reconnected 54-acres of floodplain habitat to the Sandusky River, removed dikes, and created 32-acres of floodplain wetland scrapes to enhance the site's capacity to retain floodwaters and restore native vegetation. This site was restored in essentially 1 year which is lightning speed for restoring resources that have been lost over the course of a century. Nutrient reduction at this site could be as high as 916 pounds of phosphorous and 4.9 tons of nitrogen removed per year.

H2Ohio Students Take Action

Our educational outreach team *H2Ohio Students Take Action* is an ongoing partnership with the Aerospace & Natural Science Academy of Toledo has brought students into the H2Ohio initiative, taking a deep dive into the Oak Openings expansion project with help from Metroparks Toledo and MAD Scientist Associates. This project which will regrade and restore previously farmed lands into restored wetland habitat in the Oak Openings region, which is considered "globally rare" by The Nature Conservancy. At the start of 2021, the school began raising native plants for the restoration project in the school's greenhouse. They have about 800 ready to plant in the ground during an event with ODNR and Metroparks Toledo this Friday, October 29th. Metroparks will soon add 15,000 native hardwood trees, primarily oaks, across that property.

We have also engaged over 140 private landowners in our H2Ohio efforts through the Water Quality Incentives Program that adds an additional one-time bonus to enroll in wetland restoration and wooded riparian planting practices within the Lake Erie Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. This will result in over 2,400 acres of new wetland, buffer and wooded riparian area in the Lake Erie Watershed.

Altogether, we are proud of each one of our nearly 70 projects that are completed or underway right now, soaking up floodwater and filtering over a hundred thousand acres of watershed with newly restored ecosystem function. We are also currently wrapping up our project selections to bring another dozen water quality wetland projects online across the Ohio River basin, taking ODNR's H2Ohio Program more fully into a new geography.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you again for giving me the opportunity to testify about the great work of the Department of Natural Resources as we strive every day *to ensure a balance between wise use and protection of our natural resources for the benefit of all*. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.