



Thank you, Chairman Dolan, Vice-Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes and committee members, for the opportunity to discuss the Ohio Department of Agriculture’s role in the implementation of H2Ohio. The program’s successes have been possible through dedicated focus from the Administration and from you – our partners in the legislature who have shown your commitment to water quality. Above all, it has happened due to overwhelming interest from Ohio’s agricultural community.

Under ODA’s jurisdiction of the H2Ohio Initiative, over one million acres of Ohio’s cropland was enrolled in the program in the original 14-county area of the Maumee River Watershed. That is about 40% of the area’s cropland. In February, ODA began sending payments to the producers who are implementing the 10 Best Management Practices, or BMPs. These practices are proven to reduce phosphorus runoff and prevent algal blooms.

The problem of Harmful Algal Blooms can only be fixed through consistent, long-term efforts across the landscape to reduce the amount of nutrients in the Western Lake Erie Basin. As a result of H2Ohio, as well as other partner initiatives, progress is being made toward the goal of reducing phosphorus by 40%. H2Ohio is working and we are seeing results.

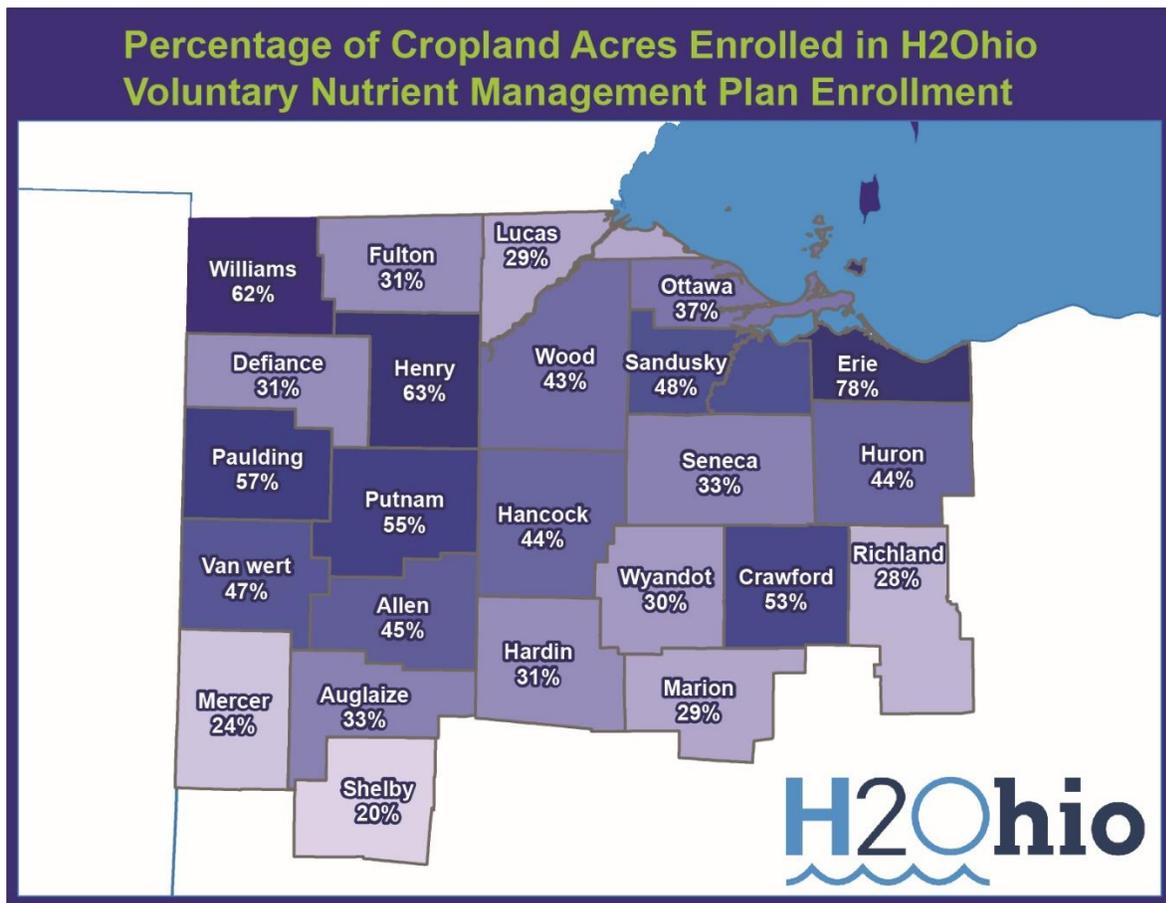
The Main Operating Budget allowed us to expand the H2Ohio Program this year to include 10 additional counties. This means H2Ohio is now available to producers in all of the Western Lake Erie Basin. This is a large area of Ohio’s cropland and we are proud to have so many producers voluntarily implementing BMPs.



As in the original 14 counties, we've seen remarkable interest from farmers and have, once again, exceeded our enrollment goals in the expansion area. More than 800 producers in this area have enrolled about 600,000 acres in the program, with practices already being implemented. This represents about 36% of the total cropland in the 10 additional counties.

The Soil and Water Districts have worked diligently to help producers through the enrollment process. It has been a learning experience. From year one to year two, the process was examined, and changes were made to improve the efficiency of the program as a whole. In the expansion area, only three BMPs are being offered in the first year – Voluntary Nutrient Management Plans, known as VNMPs, Conservation Crop Rotation and Cover Crops.

The VNMP is the foundation for which all other practices are built. A completed and approved VNMP is a requirement for all producers in the H2Ohio Program. It specifies the nutrient needs of the preceding crops, so producers apply the correct amount of manure or fertilizer and minimize nutrient runoff. A VNMP addresses what is known as the 4Rs of nutrient stewardship – right fertilizer source, right rate, right time, and right place. This is critical to the H2Ohio Program.



From the map, you can see the breakdown for each county of percentage of cropland enrolled in the VNMP practice. The top counties are Erie with 78%, Henry at 63%, and Williams with 62%. Overall, in all 24 counties, approximately 38% of the total cropland in the Western Lake Erie Basin is enrolled in the H2Ohio VNMP Practice. We applaud the producers for wanting to be part of the solution to improving water quality in our state.

We also reopened enrollment in the original 14 counties to allow farmers who did not sign up initially to have that opportunity now. We have seen the power of the farming community as word has spread from neighbor to neighbor and producers are encouraging each other to be conservation-minded in their practices, lauding the benefits of the H2Ohio Program. It is important to note that payments do not go out to enrollees until practices are implemented and verified under the specifications of H2Ohio.

None of this would be possible without the help of our Soil and Water Districts in each county. Those employees have put forth best efforts to ensure H2Ohio is a success. They meet with each producer and walk them through the requirements of the program, thoroughly explain the BMPs, and help them determine which practices will most effectively work on their particular cropland. That is no easy task, as they have processed more than 2500 applications. Staffing that kind of workload has created challenges, but each office has met the challenge and is committed to seeing the H2Ohio Program succeed.

These offices have tremendous leadership guiding them in the Ohio Federation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts. We would like to give a special thank you to Matt Peart, Jeff Duling, and Kris Swartz for their continued partnership and understanding of the importance of H2Ohio.

When it comes to partnerships, it is vital to mention our valued partnership with the Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative, or OACI. It is a diverse group including the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, the livestock and commodity organizations and various environmental groups. It is a groundbreaking collaboration, bringing together the agricultural industry and environmental advocates. OACI's mission is parallel to the mission of H2Ohio; encourage producers to utilize conservation practices to help Ohio's water quality.

OACI has launched a Farmer Certification Program which works hand in hand with H2Ohio. It gathers information about the measures producers are proactively implementing on their farms to support healthy soil and water and educates them on further steps they can take through H2Ohio. Producers enrolled in H2Ohio are also required to enroll in the Certification Program.

The collaborations within H2Ohio reach further than OACI. We have developed an impressive network of academia and researchers to help document the actual reductions of nutrients through real-time, on-the-ground assessment and edge of field monitoring. These scientific measurements are essential to H2Ohio as we strive to meet the 40% reduction goal.



We also recognize how important House Bill 7 is to the H2Ohio effort – passed late last year by the General Assembly. HB 7 creates a statewide watershed planning and management program with the goal of improving and protecting these areas as it pertains to water quality. ODA is tasked with hiring a coordinator in each of these seven watersheds, with specific experience and qualifications. Five of these seven positions have been filled and we are in the process of completing our two remaining hires. However, these positions were created without allocated funding and are being paid with H2Ohio funds. As the requirements put forth by HB 7 continue beyond this General Assembly, we look forward to further budgetary discussions with the Legislature to ensure that these positions are properly funded into the future. We are thankful to the Legislature for their diligent work with HB 7 and the H2Ohio Initiative as a whole.

Producers have made a long-term commitment to continue implementing H2Ohio practices. Contracts for 2022 and 2023 are currently being finalized. ODA has committed more than \$125 million to the Maumee River Watershed since the H2Ohio Program began and the funds allocated in the biennium budget passed by this General Assembly will allow the important work to continue.

Mr. Chairman and committee members - we are just beginning to see the long term, positive effects that H2Ohio will have on water quality in our state and the Ohio Department of Agriculture is thankful for our partnership with you in this endeavor. Thank you.

