



March 15, 2023- House Finance Subcommittee on  
Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources

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## ***Testimony on H2Ohio***

### **Anne M. Vogel, Director**

Good morning, Chairman Jones, Ranking Member Troy, and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources. My name is Anne Vogel, Director of the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about H2Ohio.

I would like to thank the General Assembly for your continued support of H2Ohio, which has allowed Ohio EPA, Ohio Department of Agriculture and Ohio Department of Natural Resources the ability to improve the lives of Ohioans across the state through better water quality. I had the privilege of working on this Initiative while in the Governor's Office and have seen the impacts it has had across Ohio.

#### **Overview**

Ohio EPA is requesting an appropriation of \$20 million in fiscal year 2024 and fiscal year 2025 to continue H2Ohio water infrastructure projects.

Ohio EPA is also requesting an additional \$13.5 million each fiscal year to support the H2Ohio Rivers Initiative.

Over 59,000 Ohioans have been served by 37 infrastructure projects Ohio EPA has funded through H2Ohio since it was created. Ohio EPA's H2Ohio funding addresses critical water and wastewater infrastructure needs in Ohio communities, particularly in economically disadvantaged communities that have projects that would not be possible without additional financial support.

In fiscal year 2022, Ohio EPA awarded \$3.9 million to nine communities for critical water and sewer infrastructure projects, \$1.9 million to six underserved communities to eliminate lead service lines, \$2.1 million to 53 communities for lead service line mapping initiatives, \$575,000 to remove or repair failing home septic systems, and \$450,000 for stream monitoring, and \$149,000 to assess technologies to reduce algal blooms.

#### **Drinking Water**

Ohio EPA is proud to support drinking water projects in Ohio communities that will have life changing impacts. Lawrence and Noble counties, two communities where residents had to haul water to their homes, received grants to design or construct waterlines to serve customers directly in their homes. Ohioans in Athens and Adams Counties, communities who had experienced frequent interruptions in their water service, received grant funding to purchase equipment and repair damaged infrastructure to provide their residents with more reliable water service.

## **Waste Projects**

Funding provided for wastewater projects by Ohio EPA assisted in providing sewer service to more than 1,700 homes in unsewered areas. Thanks to H2Ohio funding, in Washington County, the community of Devola is finally able to address long-standing issues with failing septic systems and provide sewer service to residents. In Ross County, the largest unsewered community in Ohio will be served by a new sanitary sewer system and wastewater treatment plant. Similar projects in Hancock, Harrison, and Darke counties will eliminate aging and failing infrastructure and provide residents with solutions that are more sanitary and remove threats to public health and the environment.

In addition to improving community owned infrastructure, Ohio EPA has continued to partner with local health departments to support homeowners who have aging or failing septic systems. Since the start of H2Ohio, 23 counties across Ohio have been awarded funding to address aging or failing septic systems. In fiscal year 2022 alone, Ohio EPA provided \$575,000 to local health departments Hocking, Jackson, Portage, Ross, and Seneca Counties. The local health departments work with contractors to help disadvantaged homeowners repair or replace their aging or failing septic system.

## **Lead**

Another continued focus for Ohio EPA under H2Ohio is reducing lead exposure in drinking water. In fiscal year 2022, \$4.6 million was directed to communities to address lead risk in Ohio communities. The needs to reduce lead risk vary among public water systems in Ohio. Many communities have their lead service lines mapped and ready for replacement, while others need additional support to do inventory and mapping of lines. Ohio EPA is meeting the needs of Ohio communities by providing support for shovel ready lead line replacement projects and awarding funding for inventory and mapping.

Ohio EPA provided \$1.9 million to communities with lead line replacement projects that were ready to proceed in Allen, Van Wert, Hamilton, Mahoning, Hamilton, Trumbull, and Harrison counties. And \$2.1 million was provided to 53 small and medium sized communities statewide to identify and map their lead service lines. These grants will prepare communities for other funding opportunities available for lead service line replacement, including those offered through the Infrastructure, Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). And \$600,000 of the lead line mapping grants were awarded to communities' Rural Community Assistance Program (RCAP), who partners with Ohio EPA and provides direct technical assistance to communities in completing their lead maps.

I ask for your continued support for H2Ohio's funding request in the upcoming biennium for Ohio EPA, along with our partnering agencies, Ohio Department of Agriculture and Ohio Department of Natural Resources. The projects Ohio EPA has been able to fund through H2Ohio have the potential to be life-changing for many of the people we serve- whether it's a mother who no longer needs to worry about exposing her children to lead through drinking water or a community that has been relying on old, failing septic systems that now can tie into a sewer system.

While there are numerous programs that help support communities by funding water and wastewater infrastructure projects through loans and grants, H2Ohio has the unique ability to fill funding gaps that cannot be addressed by other existing programs, including the IIJA funding. In many situations, H2Ohio awards are the "last mile" of funding for communities that are receiving loan and grant funding from other sources and helps ease the burden for grantees and their ratepayers, who often shoulder the cost of large water and sewer projects through increased rates.

### **H2Ohio Rivers Initiative**

Also, in H2Ohio's biennium request is funding toward the H2Ohio Rivers Initiative, which will give Ohio EPA and Ohio Department of Natural Resources opportunities to continue the important work of improving Ohio's rivers throughout the state.

One of Ohio EPA's and Ohio Department of Natural Resources' priorities through the H2Ohio Rivers Initiative will be dam removals. Many low head dams are found on Ohio's rivers and are aging, with risk of potential catastrophic failure. Apart from the danger posed to Ohio's residents, these old dams are harmful to rivers because they restrict the natural movement of fish (e.g., for spawning), and impede the normal processing of nutrients and sediment as water moves downstream. Ohio EPA will work with ODNR to remove aging and non-functional low head dams to

improve safety and the health of our large rivers. The Hamilton Low Dam that currently restricts 13 species of fish to the lower 34 miles of the Great Miami River, including 3 species with recreational importance (spotted bass, sauger and freshwater drum) is the perfect candidate for this funding. Restoring the Great Miami River to free-flowing status would result in immediate improvement to water quality and biological condition as well as an increase in recreational opportunities for paddle sports.

Another focus for Ohio EPA under the H2Ohio Rivers Initiative will be river restoration. Portions of Ohio's rivers and streams have modified or degraded conditions because aquatic life uses do not meet the minimum goals of the Clean Water Act. These waters, such as Wilson Creek in Clinton County that feeds into Cowan Lake, can be negatively impacted by organic enrichment, habitat modification, channelization, metals, and legacy sediment contamination. Ohio EPA hopes to use H2Ohio Rivers Initiative funding for restoration projects such as creating a trapezoidal ditch which has the potential to become a self-forming channel to allow for natural features to self-form and recover passively, which is seen as a viable practice for drainage maintenance.

This initiative will prioritize and fund river restoration in areas with impairments through stream restoration, habitat creation, and contaminated sediment removal. The goal of this program will be to remove water quality impairments to improve the ecosystems and put these waterbodies across Ohio on a path to exceptional warm water habitat and/or a scenic river designation.

Through the H2Ohio Rivers Initiative, Ohio EPA will survey Ohio's large rivers for previously unmeasured contaminants and contaminants of emerging concern. Ohio EPA would assess the levels of these contaminants in the environment and their potential impact to aquatic life. This proposal is an extension of extensive sampling that was conducted in 2020 and 2021 on all large rivers throughout the Ohio. This collection of new data will enable Ohio EPA to compare Ohio's waters to draft federal values. This data collection will establish baseline concentrations in Ohio's surface waters and aquatic life. Ohio EPA does not anticipate the findings to exceed U.S. EPA's criteria. The science continues to evolve, and Ohio EPA wants to ensure Ohio has the best information to protect Ohioans.

Overall Ohio has made great strides in improving water quality under Governor DeWine's H2Ohio Initiative and Ohio EPA and our partners look forward to continuing this important work to improve water quality, protect wildlife and create healthy environments for Ohioans to recreate in rivers across the state.