



Ohio Department of Natural Resources

MIKE DEWINE, GOVERNOR

MARY MERTZ, DIRECTOR

House Finance and Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources

H2Ohio Testimony in Support of House Bill 33 Provided by Ohio Department of Natural Resources Director Mary Mertz March 15, 2023

Good morning, Chairman Jones, Ranking Member Troy, and Members of the House Finance and Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources. 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 on H2Ohio.

H2Ohio

Under the leadership of Governor DeWine and with support from the General Assembly, we have been able to successfully establish and implement the H2Ohio initiative over the last four years. While much of the initial work has focused on Lake Erie, we have also implemented a number of projects across the entire state, and see that effort expanding in the future. The funds we are requesting in this budget will be used to assist with water quality improvements and protections throughout the entire state.

ODNR's request for the upcoming biennium is \$70 million, or \$35 million in each of the two fiscal years. This is a \$10 million increase per fiscal year, from the last budget. ODNR will continue to use this funding to invest in natural infrastructure, or wetland projects, adding to the 141 projects we already have completed or in progress. The wetlands already funded are projected to reduce phosphorous loading in our waters by over 100 thousand pounds per year. These wetlands will also reduce nitrogen by 185 thousand pounds per year, and we estimate will sequester 5.3 million pounds of carbon per year.

Many of the H2Ohio wetlands will provide outdoor recreation opportunities for hunting, trapping, fishing, birding, walking, or paddling. We are pleased to work with so many local partners to bring these projects to life, including local park districts, soil and water conservation districts, land trusts, Ducks Unlimited and others.

I anticipate the additional funding will allow us to launch even more water quality natural infrastructure projects across the entire state. And we will do that based on some of the advice and feedback of our partners at LEARN, a consortium of water equality experts in Ohio's institutions of higher education who are active in monitoring our work in the field, to see if we are getting the results we are pursuing.

Additionally, we will continue our conservation education initiative known as the H2Ohio Students Take Action Program. This program offers opportunities for educational programming both in schools and out in the field. Programming is geared toward grades 6-12 and is designed to encourage citizen science, civic engagement, and Great Lakes stewardship through education. We were excited to expand the program in December 2022 from one full-time naturalist to two full-time naturalists, entirely



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committed to educating youth about the importance of water quality. More than 2,200 students have been reached in the last year.

The program gives students the opportunity to learn through real-world experience, with projects that include invasive species removal, enhancing wetland landscapes with their own native plant propagations, and other science-based activities. I have shared with some of you a story of students from the Aerospace and Natural Science Academy of Toledo, one of our many partner schools. The students raised hundreds of native plants in their school's greenhouse and planted them at the Oak Openings wetland project. This year they are taking action by raising blue gill in three aquaculture systems and releasing them at a nearby marsh. Other notable projects include student installation of water level gauges at Oakwoods and Brooks Park project sites, enabling citizen-collected hydrologic data. These are a few examples of the many ways the H2Ohio Students Take Action program is helping and encouraging teachers and students to make positive, real-world change in their watershed.

H2Ohio Rivers Program

Another new, exciting expansion of the H2Ohio program is the H2Ohio Rivers Initiative. This initiative is designed to improve water quality, ensure community health, protect wildlife, and provide opportunities for recreation in and along Ohio's rivers. Between the Ohio Department of Natural Resources and the Ohio EPA, we are requesting a total of \$58.8 million dollars. Collectively we will use this funding to approach river water quality in three focus areas: 1) additional monitoring and collection of data; 2) working to restore river health where it has degraded; 3) protecting those rivers and river corridors identified as healthy.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources is specifically requesting \$36 million for the biennium, or \$18 million each fiscal year. This funding will be used for monitoring fish and mussel populations, actions to address litter prevention and litter clean-up, dam removal, and remediation of streams impaired by acid mine drainage. We also plan to protect streamside habitat through either purchases or easements of high-quality riparian areas, and by working to expand the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) to the Great Miami Watershed.

With the expansion of H2Ohio and the H2Ohio Rivers Initiative, I hope our commitment to clean and accessible water across the entire state is clear.

Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, thank you again for giving me the opportunity to testify about the great work of the H2Ohio Program. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.