



Ohio Department of Agriculture

Ohio Department of Agriculture House Budget Testimony FY 24-25

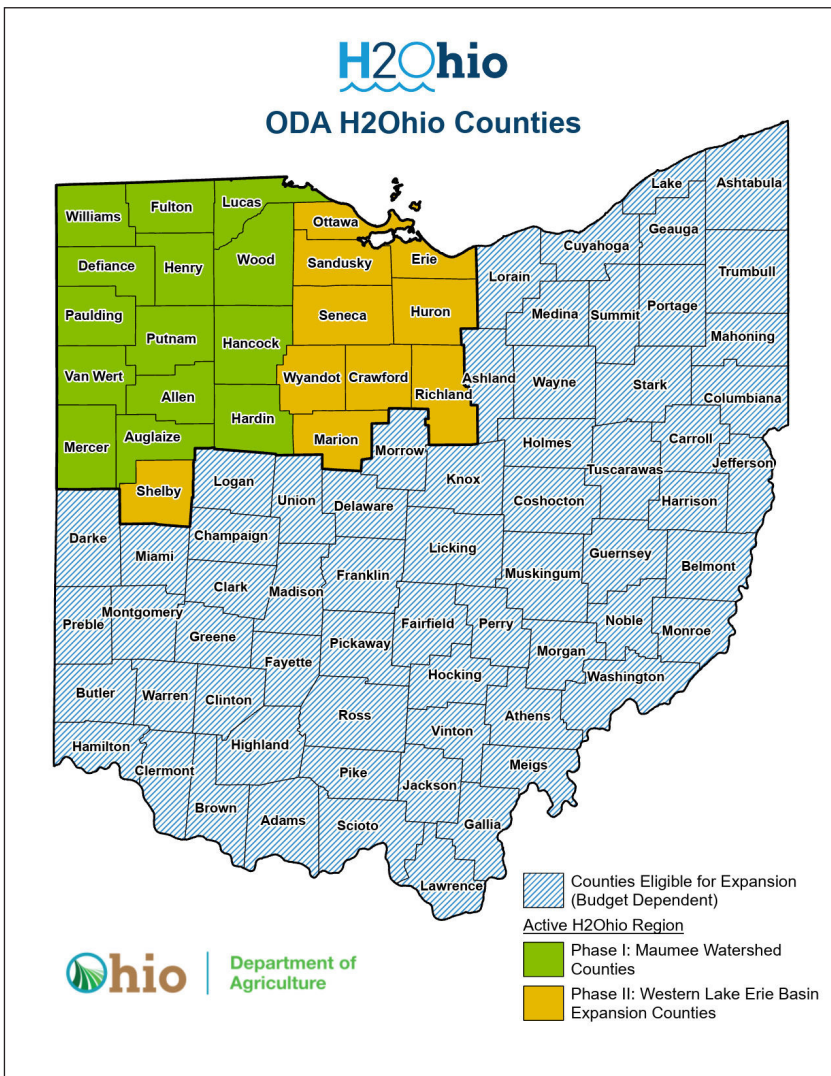
Director Brian Baldrige 03-15-2023

H2Ohio

Chairman Jones, Ranking Member Troy, and Members of the Finance Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development and Natural Resources, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on behalf of Governor DeWine and the Ohio Department of Agriculture (ODA).

The H2Ohio program has seen success and expansion, thanks to the continued support of the General Assembly. ODA has increased its efforts toward improving the state's water quality and reducing

phosphorus that contributes to harmful algal blooms in Lake Erie. Between the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, and ODA, the 2022 phosphorus reduction is estimated to be a nearly 290,000 pounds. This represents nearly 30% of Ohio's goal to reduce the phosphorus load by 1 million pounds.



Agriculture's H2Ohio practices alone were estimated to reduce the amount of phosphorus going into the Western Lake Erie Basin (WLEB) by approximately 222,000 pounds in 2022. ODA has provided cost sharing on best management practices to more than 2,400 producers in the WLEB for Voluntary Nutrient Management Plans (VNMP), Phosphorus Placement, Manure Utilization, and Overwintering Cover.

More farmers are now implementing agricultural best management practices that reduce nutrient runoff into Ohio's waterways. The results have exceeded our expectations: H2Ohio has more than 1.5 million acres of farmland enrolled in VNMPs in 24 counties, which is nearly 35% of the total cropland in the WLEB. Of those acres, 1.2 million are enrolled in additional best management practices.

Farmers in the original 14 counties have now been implementing the practices for two growing seasons.

Based on this experience, ODA has adapted its process to help producers more accurately identify the practices that will work best on their land. This includes adding additional conservation practices like the Two-Stage Ditch program that complements the existing suite of water quality practices. Current enrollment has exceeded ODA's expectations and shows farmer interest in addressing Lake Erie's water quality concerns. Program enrollment for 2023 shows additional phosphorus load reductions, and ODA expects increased enrollment in the H2Ohio program for 2024 and beyond.



Pictured above and below: Edge-of-field monitoring and drainage.

The FY24-25 budget request will expand the investment in H2Ohio by streamlining practices and adding incentives specifically for the WLEB. ODA's goal is to increase program enrollment in the current H2Ohio project area to 2 million acres of cropland. With higher adoption rates and increased program

enrollment, ODA projects continued progress toward the phosphorus load reduction goal for the WLEB.



ODA's FY24-25 budget request includes \$69 million per year in H2Ohio funding to continue supporting and refining these practices in the WLEB and expand H2Ohio's footprint across the remainder of the state, targeting 500,000 acres of farmland. GRF funding is also requested to increase financial assistance to Soil and Water Conservation Districts that provide the boots on the ground in implementing conservation programming. As the program continues its growth, dedicated H2Ohio staffing is needed to implement the expansion and ensure accountability as we track and monitor progress. Nine ODA staff will help with

producer VNMPs, enrollment, and the launch of H2Ohio in new regions.

ODA's H2Ohio program has received widespread support from both the agricultural community and environmental interests. This funding level will allow us to continue programming in our existing footprint and expand into the rest of the state.

I wish to conclude by saying that your support, as always, is critical to our success at ODA. We sincerely appreciate the opportunity to share our vision of Ohio's agricultural future. Please know these efforts are making a difference for water quality.

Chairman Jones, Ranking Member Troy and members of the committee, I appreciate your attention to my testimony today and I am happy to answer any questions. Thank you.