



Ohio Department of Natural Resources

MIKE DeWINE, GOVERNOR

MARY MERTZ, DIRECTOR

**Senate Finance Committee
H2Ohio Testimony in Support of House Bill 33 & 2022 Annual Report
Provided by Ohio Department of Natural Resources Director Mary Mertz
April 18, 2023**

Good morning, Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, 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 on H2Ohio's 2022 Annual Report, as well as the program's budget request for FY 24-25.

H2Ohio 2022 Annual Report

Under the leadership of Governor DeWine and with support from the General Assembly, ODNR has successfully established and implemented our agency's part of the H2Ohio initiative over the last four years. Our role within H2Ohio focuses on improving water quality through natural infrastructure by restoring wetlands across the state. Wetlands naturally improve water quality by trapping, filtering, or removing excess nutrients and other pollutants in surface water on a long-term basis. Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems for wildlife habitat. Because of this, wetlands provide priceless, recreational opportunities for outdoor enthusiasts of all kinds. An additional benefit is meaningful carbon sequestration.

In fiscal year 2022, under ODNR's leadership, 33 new H2Ohio wetland projects were launched, 1,550 new acres were added to wetland and ecosystem restoration projects, approximately 31,000 acres were filtered by wetland projects, 28 nonprofit conservation partners were engaged, and 20,000 trees were planted in wetland buffers.

We continue to make great strides with this program, and I want to highlight a few of the projects mentioned in our annual report that also happen to be in some of your districts.

Sandusky River Headwaters Preserve Wetland & Habitat Restoration

ODNR partnered with the Crawford Park District to restore a 38-acre streamside property that will capture eighty-five acres of offsite drainage before it flows into the Sandusky River. A total of 7 acres of wetlands were restored with the remaining portion of the field planted for pollinator habitat which will provide additional water quality benefits and a source for food for native species. Beyond the water quality improvements, the Sandusky Headwaters Preserve Wetland and Habitat Restoration project offers a scenic spot for visitors to enjoy nature, photograph wildlife, and enjoy programs by the Crawford Park District.

Chagrin River & East Branch Corridor Restoration and Protection Project



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ODNR partnered with Chagrin River Watershed Partners on this 78-acre project that will restore nearly a quarter mile of river by stabilizing eroding streambanks using riparian buffers and redirecting the energy of the stream away from its banks. A one-acre oxbow wetland will also be created to trap water during high flow conditions. The new wetland area and riparian buffers will slow down water entering the East Branch and mainstem of the Chagrin River. This will allow for the filtration of water, specifically the removal of nutrients and other pollutants before they flow downstream toward Lake Erie, to improve water quality. Each of these restoration components will also create and enhance habitat for a variety of wildlife, including amphibians, fish, and waterfowl. The project is primarily occurring at Daniels Park in Willoughby, OH, a very popular area for steelhead anglers. In addition to the restoration components which have the potential to benefit the steelhead fishery, the addition of publicly accessible lands will benefit the entire community, especially anglers and other groups, and their access to the river.

Indian Creek-Hoffmann Wetland and Stream Restoration

ODNR partnered with Three Valley Conservation Trust on the Indian Creek-Hoffmann Wetland and Stream Restoration project located on a privately owned 22-acre farm in Butler County. The project will stabilize a severely eroded 600-foot section of Indian Creek streambank by restoring 1 acre of riparian buffer and redirecting stream flow into 12 acres of a newly restored forested wetland complex. The restored wetlands will reduce stream flow and therefore erosion rates while significantly improving water quality by filtering sediments and nutrients out of the Beals Run - Indian Creek watershed. Planting native trees, shrubs and grasses and restoring the riparian buffer will provide shade, cool the stream water, and help to maintain healthy levels of oxygen in the stream. These benefits are critical for a highly intolerant, declining or otherwise ecologically significant species of fish such as the black redhorse, banded darter, and stonecat. The project will also serve as an outdoor laboratory for various research projects conducted by faculty, undergraduate and graduate students from Miami University.

Budget Request

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



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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 committed to educating youth about the importance of water quality and the H2Ohio program. More than 2,200 students have been reached in the last year. The H2Ohio Students Take Action program is funded through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, leveraging federal funding into our program.

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 bluegill 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:

- 1) Additional data collection by monitoring fish and mussel populations:
- 2) Work to restore degraded areas through actions to address litter prevention and litter clean-up, dam removal, and remediation of streams impaired by acid mine drainage.
- 3) And finally, work 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.



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

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, 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.