



**Testimony of Kristy Meyer, Managing Director of Agricultural, Health & Clean Water
Programs, Ohio Environmental Council
Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Energy & Commerce,
Subcommittee on Environment and Energy
Honorable John Shimkus, Chair, Gregg Harper, Vice Chair, and
Paul Tonko, Ranking Member
February 5, 2015**

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today on the Drinking Water Protection Act, H.R. 212, introduced by the Honorable Bob Latta. I am truly honored to be here today.

My name is Kristy Meyer and I am the Managing Director of Agricultural, Health & Clean Water Programs with the Ohio Environmental Council (OEC).

Our organization, the OEC, is a 46 year-old non-for-profit advocacy organization. Our mission is to secure healthy air, land, and water for all who call Ohio home. We use scientific principles, legislative initiatives, legal action, and partnerships to secure a healthier environment for Ohio's families and communities.

On behalf of our network of more than 100 local and state environmental-conservation organizations and thousands of members across the state, I would like to thank Representative Latta for recognizing the need for public health advisories and standards by which drinking water utilities can monitor and test for cyanotoxins, as well as starting this vital conversation. We fully support this legislation going forward.

This legislation, coupled with the regulatory guidance that should be coming out later this year, will ensure the safety of Toledo residents, Ohioans, and the citizens of our great nation.

Lake Erie

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Lake Erie is a foundation of health, economic vitality, and recreation for millions of Ohioans and those that vacation in our state. Unique among the Great Lakes, Lake Erie is the shallowest, warmest and most biologically productive. The Lake supports one of the largest freshwater commercial fisheries in the world and the largest sport fishery in the Great Lakes, producing more fish for human consumption than the other four Great Lakes combined.

Each year more than twelve million people flock to Ohio's portion of Lake Erie to wildlife watch, fish, hunt, recreate and create family memories. As a result, more than \$12.9 billion in travel and tourism revenue is generated each year and \$1.7 billion in federal, state, and local taxes, supporting more than 119,000 direct jobs.

Travel and tourism is a \$40 billion industry in Ohio, nearly a third of that comes from the eight counties along the Lake. To help understand how significant this is, compare Lake Erie Travel and Tourism to other prominent industries in Ohio. For example, according to the Ohio Coal Association, Ohio's coal industry generates \$4.3 billion in revenue annually for the state of Ohio and directly employs nearly 3,000 people. According to the Homebuilders Association, building houses in Ohio accounts for approximately 10,500 direct jobs. It is clear that a healthy Lake Erie means a better economy for Ohio.

Lake Erie, however, is not only an unique ecosystem that provides habitat for wildlife and recreational opportunities, but it also supports heavy manufacturing, commerce, and farming.

While it does so much for us, it desperately needs our help. Since 1995, phosphorous in the Lake (specifically, bioreadably available phosphorus, or dissolved reactive phosphorus) has been increasing. This has led to an increasing frequency of harmful algal blooms that put water

quality at high risk. For example, in 2011, phosphorous in Lake Erie was found in concentrations 1,000 times higher than what the World Health Organization recommends for safe contact. Continued phosphorous loading in Lake Erie is what led to a "do not drink" water advisory on September 4, 2013 for the residents of Carroll Township and a weekend without water for nearly a half of million people on August 2, 2014.

Drinking Water Crisis

I will never forget Saturday, August 2, 2014. At 8 a.m. my good friend who lives in Toledo called me, talking very fast. She told me that Toledo residents had been told not to drink the water. She stated she had a cup of coffee made with tap water and asked if she would be okay. My head was spinning thinking about this news - all those people had no drinking water and boiling the water would only further concentrate the toxins found in the toxic algae. Imagine parents telling their children they could not drink, or should not even touch, their water, hospital staff trying to safe guard their patients, or a local mom-and-pop businesses that temporarily closed their doors to protect their customers. While no one was seriously injured during this emergency, some small businesses , unfortunately, paid the ultimate price. Thankfully the Ohio EPA and the U.S. EPA quickly stepped in and worked with Toledo to ensure the safety of Toledo's residents. Within approximately three days tap water to the residents of Toledo was restored.

How could this be? A modern American city in a first-world nation dealing with third-world water problems. This news spread like a wildfire to the furthest reaches of the globe giving the U.S., Ohio, Toledo, and Lake Erie a black eye.

Frankly many of my friends that live in the Toledo area still tell me they are scared to drink the water. They buy bottled water instead of turning on their tap.

Clean potable water is essential to life and according to the U.S. EPA there is not one state in this amazing nation that has not experienced a harmful algal bloom. This is not just a problem for Lake Erie. In fact, in 2010 more than 10 inland lakes in Ohio, as well as Lake Erie, experienced a toxic algal bloom.

In Ohio, we always say that Lake Erie is the canary in the coal mine for the whole Great Lakes region. The "weekend without water" crisis is a wake up call not just for Ohio, but for our nation. Our waterways are at risk from excessive nutrient pollution, whether that be phosphorous or nitrogen. We must address this problem for the health and safety of our children and grand children and this bill will help ensure safe guards are in place to protect our families and future generations.

Need to Treat the Problem Not Cure the Symptom

It is vitally important to ensure safe drinking water, but we cannot cure the symptoms and expect this problem to go away. According to the Ohio Phosphorus Task Force, we need to slash the nutrients flowing into Lake Erie by at least 40%. This task force, which the Ohio Environmental Council participated in, was lead by the Ohio Lake Erie Commission. Members included federal and state agencies, well-known universities such as Ohio State University, Ohio Sea Grant College Program; Heidelberg University; the Ohio Farm Bureau; Ohio Agribusiness Association; Ohio Certified Crop Advisors; and the Ohio Soybean Council. Slashing phosphorus inputs flowing into Lake Erie by 40% was agreed to by all partners.

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Achieving this 40% reduction goal means that we need to curb phosphorus from all sources such as: (1) wastewater treatment plants and sewer overflows by upgrading our sewer infrastructure and utilizing green infrastructure like wetlands where and when appropriate; (2) reducing farm field runoff by ensuring that each farmer samples their soil for the appropriate amount of fertilizer to be applied as well as develop and implement a nutrient management plan at the very minimum; (3) curbing urban landscape runoff via the use of green infrastructure amongst other measures; and (4) ensuring our wetlands and small streams are protected and are healthy ecosystems - meandering streams can help assimilate nutrients where as straightened ditches move the nutrients quickly into the next receiving body, such as the Maumee River and then Lake Erie.

Conclusion

The Ohio Environmental Council thanks Representative Latta for acting quickly and recognizing the importance of ensuring safe potable drinking water. Because of the critical importance of ensuring potable drinking water, we urge this committee to swiftly adopt this legislation so that hopefully measures will be in place before the 2016 toxic algal bloom season begins.

Thank you again for the privilege of testifying before this committee today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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