

**STATEMENT OF JOY MULINEX, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE OHIO
LAKE ERIE COMMISSION**

**SUNSET REVIEW COMMITTEE
REVIEW OF THE
OHIO LAKE ERIE COMMISSION**

August 28, 2024

Good afternoon, Chair Wilkin, Vice Chair Hillyer, and the members of the Sunset Review Committee. My name is Joy Mulinex, and I am the Executive Director of the Ohio Lake Erie Commission. I am pleased to appear before you today to provide testimony regarding the Ohio Lake Erie Commission.

The General Assembly established the Commission in 1990 for the purpose of protecting Lake Erie's natural resources, restoring degraded elements of the Lake's ecosystem and promoting economic development of Ohio's North Coast. The Commission is comprised of the directors of six state agencies which include the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency and the Departments of Natural Resources, Transportation, Development, Health, and Agriculture. There are also five additional members appointed by the Governor who serve 3-year terms. Additionally, the two board members of the Great Lakes Protection Fund Board serve as ex-officio, non-voting members of the Ohio Lake Erie Commission to provide a well-rounded approach to considering Lake Erie matters.

The Commission is fully staffed with five employees, and the Commission utilizes the fiscal, legal, communications, legislative, and human resources assistance

provided to us by the Ohio EPA. The Commission receives the proceeds from the sale of the Lake Erie license plate, annual interest from the Great Lakes Protection Fund, donations, and annual contributions from our six agency commissioners to pay for operations costs. Additional federal grants are also used for operations expenses.

Lake Erie Protection Fund

The Commission receives the funds from the sale of the Lake Erie license plate and the interest from the Lake Erie Protection Fund. These dollars fund the Commission's Lake Erie Protection Fund grants. These grants address Lake Erie research and other projects that implement the objectives of the Ohio Lake Erie Protection & Restoration Plan. The Fund has distributed approximately \$13 million for over 300 projects during the last two decades.

Lake Erie Protection & Restoration Plan:

The Lake Erie Commission is charged with preparing the Lake Erie Protection & Restoration Plan for the state every two years. The Plan reflects the state's priorities to protect, preserve and restore our Great Lake as well as to promote economic development associated with Lake Erie. The Plan is designed to be updated to allow for changing priorities, serve as the basis for future Lake Erie Protection Fund grants, and provide a useful framework for securing federal funding to implement Lake Erie projects, thereby leveraging additional funding for Lake Erie work.

Nutrient Management:

Addressing the toxic algal blooms in the Western Lake Erie Basin and ensuring safe and clean water for drinking, fishing and swimming are the largest challenges facing the Commission right now. The Lake Erie Commission collaborates with our fellow agencies and other partners to develop tools such as Ohio's Domestic Action Plan, research priorities, and restoration projects. The Commission led the coordination effort to prepare Ohio's Domestic Action Plan and coordinates on the implementation of projects so that the state will meet regional, federal and international commitments on nutrient loading into Lake Erie. The DAP is a federal planning requirement for nutrient management and requires coordinating with other state agencies and stakeholders. Closely tied to this work is the Commission's H2Ohio coordination efforts for Lake Erie. The Commission staff has worked with Ohio EPA, ODNR, and ODA to implement H2Ohio projects to minimize phosphorus running into Lake Erie. Further, the Lake Erie Commission is responsible for reporting how the H2Ohio money is spent.

Areas of Concern Program:

The Commission is pleased to report ongoing progress on our program to restore the federally designated Areas of Concern (AOCs) which are sites that do not meet the goals of the U.S.-Canadian Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement. Typically, AOCs were listed as such because of historic pollution that happened several decades ago. Cleanup at these sites has accelerated over the past ten

years, and the Ashtabula River was Ohio's first AOC to be delisted in 2021. Three other Ohio AOCs remain—the Maumee, the Black, and the Cuyahoga Rivers. Through the federal Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, U.S. EPA has provided nearly \$100 million towards AOC work here in Ohio since 2019 to address the remaining AOCs in Ohio.

Marketing and education:

A 2017 study by Oxford Economics reported that for the eight counties bordering Lake Erie in Ohio, total tourism-related spending was \$15.1 billion, and the Commission is tasked with helping to increase Lake Erie travel, tourism, and economic development. The Commission works to increase the awareness of Ohioans of the benefits of Lake Erie. The Commission's "Life on Lake Erie" Photo Contest and social media marketing are examples of how we can help market one of Ohio's great natural resources

Coordination:

Lake Erie is governed by multiple international agreements, federal, and state laws. Whether the goal is water quality, fish habitat, or economic development, there is typically overlap between agency programs. As part of our coordinating responsibilities, we represent the State of Ohio on various boards of regional and international Great Lakes management organizations. We track federal Great Lakes funding opportunities and coordinate with agency partners on applications to benefit Lake Erie.

In closing, Ohio's Lake Erie Commission was created to meet the increasing need for the State of Ohio to protect and restore Lake Erie and its shoreline. Lake Erie is an economic driver for the state, and maintaining state efforts to protect that resource is important. We have identified the problems using objective measurements and developed strategies to tackle these problems. We continue to monitor program achievements. We have involved the various levels of government and included the many Lake Erie stakeholders in our processes. I believe that the Lake Erie Commission remains an important resource for Ohio.

Thank you.