The Western Lake Erie Basin (WLEB) is approximately 9,300 square miles and is dominated by agricultural activities that account for almost 70 percent of the total land area. Nearly two-thirds of the land is managed as cultivated cropland and there are 143 permitted concentrated animal feeding facilities (CAFFs). The 2012 Census of Agriculture for Ohio reported the net cash farm income of operation to be approximately $1 billion for the 19 Ohio counties within the WLEB. This indicates that agriculture is a significant contributor to the regional economy.

Most of the regional agricultural land is in areas where wetlands, including the Great Black Swamp, were once the primary landscape feature. These areas include highly productive soils, but have poor drainage. From the mid-1800s to the present, drainage ditches and subsurface tiles have been used increasingly throughout the region.

Many studies indicate that agricultural practices are the primary sources of nutrients (especially phosphorus) to Lake Erie. About 85 percent of the total phosphorus load from the Maumee River is derived from farm fertilizers and manures which are transported to surface waters via surface runoff and subsurface drainage. Many policies can assist farmers with management practices that have been shown to be effective in preventing the transport of excess nutrients.

Policy Recommendations for Agriculture

Federal and State

- Support Ohio state legislation enacted in 2015 that restricts fertilizer and manure application in the western basin of Lake Erie.
- Consider limits to tile drain density based on peer-reviewed research that considers soil drainage requirements and correlations between tile drain density and nutrient loss.
- Keep successful and innovative conservation programs like Conservation Innovation Grants and Regional Conservation Partnership Programs in the Farm Bill.
- Support programs such as Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) that promote retiring marginal, floodplain agricultural fields and allowing them to return to natural areas or wetlands. These lands buffer waterways, improve water quality and wildlife habitat, and lessen the stress on already overextended crop insurance programs in flood-prone areas.
- Consider additional incentives to keep CRP and CREP practices in place permanently, such as bonuses for farmers who provide proof that the practice is in place at the end of their contract, and who re-enroll. The bonus should be adjustable and structured to overcome market shifts so that farmers do not abandon the installed practice when crop prices fluctuate.
- Request that Ohio Department of Agriculture work with Ohio EPA to revise current permit requirements for CAFFs in consideration of the size of operation, watershed impairments, surrounding land use, and proximity to environmentally sensitive areas. Such revisions should be implemented prior to ODA issuing new permits to install or operate CAFFs.

Water Quality Council

Chair: Carol Contrada, Commissioner, Lucas County
Vice Chair: Jon Erb, Director of Public Service, City of Perrysburg

Public Water Supply Committee

Chair: John Hull, Chair, Hull & Associates

Stormwater Coalition

Chair: Kevin Laughlin, Stormwater Coordinator, Wood County

Wastewater Committee

Chair: Alice Godsey, Director of Public Utilities, City of Perrysburg

Watersheds Committee

Chair: Tim Murphy, Senior Project Manager, Civil & Environmental Consultants, Inc.

The Agenda for Lake Erie represents TMACOG members’ commitment to the restoration and preservation of the region’s greatest natural resource – Lake Erie. The lake has been endangered in the past: raw sewage, industrial by-products, and chemicals in consumer products threatened the health of Lake Erie and the entire region, resulting in Do Not Drink/Swim/Fish advisories. Through the concerted effort of dedicated citizens, governments, scientists, and policy advocates, the 1972 Clean Water Act directly addressed these environmental issues and point source pollution through regulation, resulting in significant improvement to the health of the lake. However, in the past several years, Lake Erie is again threatened by pollution from other sources, primarily non-point source nutrient runoff.

People living and working in cities, villages, and farms in the western Lake Erie watershed enjoy fertile land for agriculture as well as abundant fresh water for drinking, recreation, industry, tourism, and commerce. We celebrate the historical, social, and economic value of agriculture in our region, and recognize that both a healthy lake and healthy land are of vital importance. Our members acknowledge the challenge of developing systems of accountability to ensure that our water resources are protected and our agricultural community continues to thrive.

Water and its safe supply are critical regional issues affecting public health, economic vitality, security, and the quality of life for millions of people residing in the Lake Erie basin. TMACOG members recognize that collaborative and ongoing work needs to be done at the local, state, and federal levels to combat algal blooms and other water quality issues plaguing the lake. The recommendations within the Agenda for Lake Erie Policy Briefs lay out policy and funding recommendations that will help to ensure that current and future generations can benefit from Lake Erie and its tributaries as sources for fishing, swimming, safe drinking water, and a healthy tourism industry, all supported by a diverse ecosystem.

This policy agenda – written and approved by TMACOG members – establishes the foundation for regional advocacy on behalf of Lake Erie and local streams. It also recognizes the important role local governments play in providing water and sewer services and managing stormwater as well as the role state government plays in regulating these services. It also supports collaboration with farmers and fishermen, urban and rural dwellers, and all people in the region working to restore Lake Erie and preserve the productive vitality of our farms. The policy agenda is the region’s leaders speaking with a unified voice and will provide the framework for engaging state and federal legislators and regulating agencies.

The Agenda will be a practical tool for TMACOG members and staff. We anticipate using language in the Agenda for letters of support, to respond to public information requests, and for background for press materials. It will establish the policy background for formal comments on proposed rules and regulations, for drafting official resolutions, and for requesting action from legislators or regulatory agencies.

This Agenda will be a living document, responding to the conditions of Lake Erie and our waterways, and we anticipate it to reflect continual improvement and growing value.
Regional

• Support practices that allow producers to control tile drainage from farm fields and to implement other BMPs to reduce use of phosphorus while maintaining profitability.
• Support the use of agricultural conservation practices to reduce soil and nutrient losses from agricultural fields.
• Local governments should consider incentives, easements, or voluntary land purchases to establish setbacks from waterways.
• Support collaboration between farmers, SWCDs, and co-ops in implementing new and existing agricultural regulations and the application of fertilizer and manure.
• Work with local groups and universities to identify new methods for improving soil health and water quality. Work on tracking successes and scaling up these new best management practices (BMPs).
• Promote ongoing education and community engagement on agricultural best management practices.

Funding

• Support funding for row crop farmers to implement precision fertilizer and manure application based on accurate measures of soil conditions and for animal feeding operations to implement BMPs and/or manure management plans.
• Support funding for expanded edge-of-field monitoring, targeted soil testing, and interpretation of results.
• Support funding for expanded use of drainage control structures, application of amendments to fields, incentivize use of cover crops, installation and maintenance of edge-of-field treatment systems, and other innovative practices that address dissolved reactive phosphorus challenges.
• Support funding for wetland and riparian restoration projects, especially in frequently flooded and/or marginal production areas.
• Recommend increased funding for a robust research and monitoring network to assess the efficacy of agriculture BMPs, to quantify pathways of nutrient loss from agricultural operations, and to document progress toward meeting nutrient reduction goals.
• Increase funding to Soil and Water Conservation Districts for technical support and education to farmers and landowners and to play a larger role with watershed improvement planning and implementation functions.
• Support funding for watershed-based planning that engages the agricultural community in setting measurable goals and strategies for conservation and BMP implementation.
• Increase funding to the Ohio Lake Erie Commission (OLEC) to lead and coordinate the Ohio Domestic Action Plan and the many other duties for which it is charged. Under OLEC’s leadership, many state agencies and dozens of departments must work together to ensure that all operations lead to improved nutrient reduction practices.