Agenda for Agriculture

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.

• Support agricultural practices that limit surface and subsurface applications of commercial fertilizer and manure based on agronomic need.

• 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 adjusted to 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.

• 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.

• 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.

• Support Ohio state legislation enacted in 2015 that restricts fertilizer and manure application in the western basin of Lake Erie.

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 critical 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 on 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.

Carole Contrada
Chair
TMACOG Water Quality Council
Lucas County Commissioner

Tim W. Brown
President
TMACOG Water Quality Council
Toledo Metropolitan Area Council of Governments