Last fall, nine Lake Erie experts identified specific strategies that they viewed as most important to reducing phosphorus runoff and preventing harmful algal blooms in the lake’s western basin. As of early June, Ohio legislators were moving toward passage of a bill backing those scientists’ findings with state dollars.

“That was the blueprint — use those evidence-based strategies and then target the funds to critical areas in the sub-watersheds [of the western basin],” says Rep. Steven Arndt. Ohio admittedly has a long way to go to reach its target — a 40 percent reduction in phosphorus loads by 2025. That is the amount specified in binational agreements between the United States and Canada and among the governments of Michigan, Ohio and Ontario.

The Ohio Senate passed SB 299 with a unanimous vote, and Arndt (sponsor of the companion bill, HB 643) also expects high levels of support in the House. Under the proposal, the legislature would appropriate $36 million — a mix of general fund dollars and capital funding — for a variety of projects.

Some of the dollars would be used to prevent the open-lake disposal of dredged materials and to improve in-lake monitoring, but the greatest emphasis is placed on agricultural practices. (Previous studies have found that 85 percent of the phosphorus entering Lake Erie from the Maumee River comes from farm fertilizers and manure.)

Reflecting the scientists’ findings, the legislation specifies how the money should be used; for example:

• avoiding excess use of fertilizer through more soil testing and the implementation of technologies that allow farmers to vary application rates in different locations;
• purchasing equipment that allows for the placement of fertilizer in the subsurface of soil;
• employing the use of filter strips, blind inlets or other practices to prevent nutrient runoff; and
• installing drainage water management systems to minimize the amount of water leaving farm fields.

Central to the success of Ohio’s Clean Lake 2020 Plan, Arndt says, is convincing enough farmers to implement these practices. (New regulations are not part of SB 299.)

“We already have one-third of the agriculture community engaged in using these practices,” he notes. “But there’s still the other two-thirds. They’re intrigued, and they’d like to see the evidence and the science. That’s where our local soil and water conservation districts really can help [with outreach and education].”