Ohio using new dollars and partnerships to tackle problem of harmful algal blooms

With tens of millions in new state dollars to incentivize farmers, along with a list of best practices known to reduce phosphorus runoff, Ohio will spend the next two years implementing its most comprehensive effort to date to prevent harmful algal blooms in Lake Erie.

And it’s likely just the beginning of the commitment needed to tackle the problem.

In the new biennial budget, lawmakers appropriated $172 million for the H2Ohio Water Quality Plan. Money is being split among three agencies, with the Department of Agriculture using its dollars to reduce nonpoint source pollution — specifically the phosphorus runoff that comes from the commercial fertilizer and manure on farmland. (The Department of Natural Resources is focusing on wetlands restoration, the Environmental Protection Agency on failing septic systems and lead contamination in day care centers.)

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, nonpoint sources account for up to 89 percent of the total phosphorus loads in Lake Erie’s western basin, the shallowest part of the lake where harmful algal blooms have been most severe, drinking water supplies have been threatened, and recreational use has been hampered.

Over the next two years, the state Department of Agriculture will target changes in agricultural practices in the counties that make up the Maumee River watershed, one of the western basin’s major tributaries. State incentives will go to farmers that have been certified as having adopted a mix of nine “best practices” in nutrient management (soil testing, cover crops, edge-of-field buffers, etc.).

“They’ve done the work in finding what and where will get the biggest bang for the buck,” Bill Stanley, director of the Nature Conservancy of Ohio, says about implementation of the H2O plan. “That gives me hope that they’re on the right track.”

What to watch over the next two years, he says, is how many farmers decide to partner with the state: “The challenge is going to be signing up the farmers that you need at the scale that is needed.” Without enough buy-in for this voluntary certification program, he adds, the next step may have to be some type of enforcement mechanism.

Each county in the watershed will have a localized phosphorus target, as well as a goal for the number of acres that get certified. To encourage participation and help farmers improve their practices, the state is working with local soil and water conservation districts as well as agricultural commodity groups.

“We’ve never had such a dedicated, collaborative effort to move the needle forward on reducing phosphorus,” says Dorothy Pelanda, director of the Ohio Department of Agriculture.

Legislators will be monitoring the progress made with their new funding commitment, while also thinking about how to sustain it beyond the current budget cycle. Among the legislative proposals: create a permanent endowment fund, or ask voters to approve issuing up to $1 billion in state bonds for water quality projects over a 10-year period.
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