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SPRING 2026



Ohio Environmental Council

CAROL'S LETTER

A Legacy of Hope & Advocacy to Carry

Dear Members and Supporters,

As we look ahead, it's a moment to reflect on how far we've come, recognize the progress happening now, and consider the future we continue to build together. Rooted in the belief that progress is possible, being hopeful, active, and resilient feels especially fitting because it speaks to the vision we hold for Ohio's future and the steady, determined work shaping it.

At our most recent board retreat, former OEC Board President Rich Shank shared with me how important it is to step back and look at the whole picture—where we are and where we are going, not just the obstacles immediately in front of us. His perspective felt like a timely reminder of the long arc of this work and the progress made possible through persistence.

That perspective reflects the story of the Ohio Environmental Council itself. For more than fifty years, OEC has worked alongside Ohioans to protect the places and resources that define our state. While today's challenges may take new forms, many stem from familiar tensions between unchecked development and responsible stewardship of Ohio's land, water, and communities.

For decades, the OEC has worked to defend Ohio's only national forest from fracking and harmful development. Because advocates refused to walk away, the story of Wayne National Forest is still being written today. Despite setbacks—including the rollback of key federal protections—our Lands team continues working alongside partners and communities to safeguard these treasured landscapes. You can read more about their latest work on page 9.

While some challenges grow and change, their roots are familiar. Across the country, and here in Ohio, communities are now grappling with the rapid expansion of data centers. These projects often arrive with limited transparency, raising serious questions about impacts on water resources, energy demand, and local communities. OEC is helping lead this conversation in Ohio, working to shape policies that protect both people and the environment along with economic opportunity. You can learn more about our policy framework on page 6 and explore this issue further at our upcoming Law Center Conference at the end of September.

The challenges facing Ohio's environment may change over time, but our commitment remains constant. Time and again, OEC is called upon to protect what matters most—our air, air, land, water, and the communities that depend on them.

I invite you to explore the stories in this issue and see how our staff, partners, and supporters are putting Hope in Action across Ohio. Whether by contacting your representatives, attending an educational event, responding to an action alert, or supporting this work financially, you are an essential part of this progress.

The work didn't begin with us—but together, we ensure it continues.

Warmly,
Carol Kauffman
CEO



CELEBRATING BIPARTISAN LEADERSHIP AT OUR FIRST LEGISLATIVE RECEPTION



Spencer Dirrig
Vice President of Government Affairs

Over the past year, the Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund has taken a more deliberate approach to our work at the Statehouse with a renewed focus on outcomes. The OEC Action Fund's strategy has been straightforward: build real working relationships with legislators, bring credible policy expertise to the table, and help advance practical environmental solutions.

Environmental policy is rarely just about the environment. Conversations about clean water, conservation, and energy are also conversations about economic development, public health, and long-term infrastructure. Legislators from both parties are increasingly looking for partners who can engage seriously on those issues and help them address the growing affordability crisis in our communities. The OEC Action Fund is part of those conversations in a constructive way, building bridges and opening new doors for policy wins.

To recognize the progress being made and the leaders moving it forward, the OEC Action Fund hosted an inaugural Legislative Reception in February. The event brought together a bipartisan group of legislators, legislative staff, partners, and advocates engaged in environmental policy at the Statehouse. It provided an opportunity to step back from the day-to-day pace of legislative work and recognize several lawmakers who have played an important role in advancing environmental priorities over the last year.

During the reception, OEC Action Fund presented three awards recognizing leadership on conservation, clean water, and energy policy.

The Conservation Leadership Award recognized the sponsors of House Bill 399, legislation that would prohibit fracking in Ohio's state parks and under Lake Erie. Protecting public lands and Lake Erie remains a key priority for Ohioans across the state, and this legislation reflects a commitment to safeguarding those shared resources.



The OEC Action Fund is a 501(c)(4) organization with the Ohio Environmental Council, and lobbies on behalf of the OEC at the Ohio General Assembly. To learn more about the OEC Action Fund, visit theoecactionfund.org

The Clean Water Leadership Award recognized the sponsors of House Bill 307, bipartisan legislation to replace lead service lines and address one of the most serious drinking water challenges facing Ohio communities. Lead contamination remains a significant public health concern, and the legislation represents an important step toward safer water infrastructure across the state.

The Ohio Energy Leadership Award recognized leadership in advancing House Bill 15, bipartisan legislation that repealed the remaining OVEC subsidies created under the corrupt House Bill 6. Through work in the House Energy Committee and collaboration across the legislature, lawmakers came together to cut costs for Ohio consumers and end these costly subsidies for outdated fuel sources.

One of the most encouraging parts of the evening was the bipartisan turnout. Environmental policy continues to intersect with broader issues like affordability facing Ohioans, and progress often depends on lawmakers willing to work across party lines.

For the OEC Action Fund, the reception marked an important milestone. It reflects the stronger relationships being built at the Statehouse and the growing recognition that environmental advocates deserve a serious seat at the table. The OEC Action Fund looks forward to continuing the tradition in the years ahead as it works with leaders from both parties to advance solutions that protect Ohio's environment and strengthen communities.

ALL THE WORK MATTERS: FIRSTENERGY RELIABILITY



Nolan Rutschilling
Managing Director of Energy Policy

The Ohio Environmental Council's energy team operates in a political landscape that often prioritizes fossil fuels and private utilities over a clean, reliable, and affordable energy system. Despite consistent effort from staff, partners, and members—often at the Statehouse or Public Utilities Commission—progress can be slow and setbacks common. Still, this work builds momentum over time, leading to meaningful change.

A major breakthrough arrived in 2026: for the first time, Ohio's private utilities must report reliability performance using customer-specific metrics. These new rules require detailed data on where outages happen, how frequently they occur, and who is most affected. This shift is critical. OEC's Grid Disparity report has shown that disadvantaged communities in Ohio disproportionately experience unreliable service and underinvestment. With more transparent data, advocates and policymakers can better identify inequities and push for targeted improvements.

2021: Energy Jobs and Justice

In 2021, the Energy Jobs and Justice Act launched as an ambitious effort to promote equitable, forward-thinking clean energy policy. Developed with partners like Black Environmental Leaders, the initiative emphasized utility accountability, energy justice, and rapid decarbonization. Though aspirational, it established a strong framework and vision that continues to guide advocacy efforts.

2022: Outages

In 2022, a severe outage in central Ohio exposed major flaws in the system. During a heat wave, many residents in the AEP Ohio territory lost power for up to three days. Rolling blackouts—implemented because the grid could not handle extreme conditions—sparked public outrage, especially as they disproportionately impacted low-income communities and communities of color. This moment underscored the urgent need for greater transparency and accountability.



In response, OEC experts, including attorney Karin Nordstrom and Energy Justice Fellow Dion Mensah, developed research and policy proposals to improve how utilities report reliability. They pushed for metrics that reflect customers' real experiences rather than broad, aggregated data that obscures disparities.

2025: HB 15

In 2025, the OEC Action Fund and partners mobilized around sweeping energy legislation, which eventually became House Bill 15. Early on, we reached a pivotal moment—legislators wanted our ideas to suggest for this omnibus energy bill, and we were ready. Thanks to the groundwork laid over the last few years, the OEC Action Fund suggested language requiring location and customer-centric reliability reporting. That language was included in the final version of HB 15, legislation the OEC and OEC Action Fund worked tirelessly to improve and support, despite its flaws. This win will enable advocates, legislators, and local leaders to identify electric reliability trends in their regions, allowing them to better advocate for equitable investments in Ohio's energy grid.

While challenges remain, this progress demonstrates that sustained effort matters. The work of OEC and its supporters continues to lay the foundation for a more equitable, transparent, and clean energy future in Ohio.

MEASURING IMPACTS OF LAND STEWARDSHIP PRACTICES



Molly Jo Stanley
Southeast Ohio Regional Director

In Southeast Ohio, communities are navigating the dual challenge of restoring landscapes shaped by decades of extraction while facing new pressures from large-scale development and resource demand. Across the region, leaders, landowners, and advocates are working to address pressing challenges—building climate resilience, reducing economic disparity, improving food access, and repairing ecological degradation through active forest stewardship. At a time of increasing pressure on Ohio’s recovering ecosystems, it is critical to clearly demonstrate the long-term benefits of sustainable land management.

This work reflects a broader priority for the Ohio Environmental Council—ensuring that as Ohio grows, decisions about land use are informed by science, guided by community voice, and grounded in long-term sustainability.

Too often, conversations about land use and development move faster than the science needed to guide them. Without accessible, standardized data, communities can be left without the tools to fully understand impacts, advocate effectively, or demonstrate the value of conservation-based approaches.

Thanks to funding from the Foundation for Appalachian Ohio, a new Forest Health Metrics Tracking Protocol aims to help close that gap. The OEC proudly partnered with Rising Appalachia, The GreenReach, and the Ohio University Voinovich School to create this tool.

Forest Health Metrics Tracking Protocol Objectives At-A-Glance:

- Create standardized, reliable metrics for assessing terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity, and habitat health.
- Provide advanced methodologies for comprehensive ecosystem monitoring and restoration.



- Develop improved understanding of the impacts of land management practices on ecosystems.
- Illuminate practical solutions and best practice guidelines for sustainable water management and habitat restoration.
- Facilitate a robust framework for ongoing collaboration between researchers, landowners, land management agencies, and community stakeholders to promote data-driven conservation practices.

The protocol is now publicly available, along with four kits containing the tools needed to take accurate measurements, available for borrowing.

Data from six Rising Appalachia sites will measure the impacts of interventions such as controlled burns, agroforestry, forest farming, and timber stand improvement. These sites will serve as demonstration models to help translate findings into real-world applications and share best practices.

As Ohio faces ongoing decisions about land use and development, tools like this protocol help ensure those decisions are grounded in evidence. Making ecological data more accessible strengthens communities’ ability to engage in planning, advocate for responsible development, and protect the natural resources they depend on.

This work reflects what is possible when science, stewardship, and community come together—not just as an idea, but as action that can be measured, shared, and sustained.

BEHIND THE DATA BOOM:

WHAT IT MEANS FOR OHIO—AND WHAT OEC IS DOING



Melanie Houston
Vice President of Programs

Nearly daily, we hear from Ohio community members raising concerns about new data center development. These calls began in late 2025 and continue, often citing noise, air pollution, and limited emergency response capacity—especially in rural areas reliant on volunteer services.

Ohio has more than 200 data centers, about half in Central Ohio. Between 2017 and 2024, they received roughly \$2.5 billion in state and local tax incentives, despite ongoing debate about reducing or ending those subsidies. This underscores the need for stronger policies to ensure tech companies are responsible neighbors, protect water and grid reliability, and do not shift development costs onto residents.

A data center is a physical facility that houses computers, servers, and systems used to run applications and manage data. The size of these projects ranges from very small to extremely large so-called hyperscalers. We focus on hyperscale data centers, whose size and resource demands raise significant environmental concerns and warrant stronger protections.

Hyperscale data centers are massive, typically built on rural campuses for scale efficiencies. They require extensive infrastructure, including cooling and ventilation systems, fire suppression, power supplies, and backup generators.

Rapid growth in generative AI, bitcoin mining, cloud computing, and the ‘internet of things’ is driving unprecedented demand for new data centers. One report (McKinsey and Co) estimates that global data center capacity could more than triple by 2030.

While the exact number of hyperscale data centers in Ohio is unclear, the state ranks second nationally, according to the Ohio Chamber of Commerce. These facilities have an outsized environmental footprint: they can exceed 10,000 square feet, house over 5,000 servers, and consume vast amounts of water and electricity around the clock.

Environmental Impacts of Data Centers

In 2023, U.S. data centers used an estimated 176 terawatt-hours of electricity—more than the entire state of New Jersey—and accounted for about four percent of national demand, a share projected to rise to six to 12 percent by 2028.

Hyperscale data centers can use 1–5 million gallons of water per day—up to 365 million gallons annually—roughly the same as 12,000 people. Over the next five years, they could withdraw as much as 150 billion gallons, comparable to the annual use of 4.6 million households.

Combined with other high-demand uses like agriculture and critical minerals mining, and worsened by climate-driven drought, data center water use could strain local supplies, leading to shortages, groundwater conflicts, and aquifer contamination.

DATA CENTER ACCOUNTABILITY: KEY WINS TO DATE

- **Shaping policy at the highest level**
Successfully secured a credible scientific voice and bipartisan representation in the House version of the Data Center Commission bill—ensuring that environmental, water, and community impacts are built into the policymaking process from the start.
- **Influencing decisions across Ohio**
Delivered well-received testimony statewide, including in high-stakes cases such as the proposed moratorium near Cedar Bog, and earned formal affirmation from Columbus City Council to include our organization as an ongoing advisor on data center development.

Air pollution from hyperscale data centers is a growing concern. A recent study links nearby facilities to respiratory illness and premature death, and recommends requiring health impact assessments before siting new data centers.¹

What steps has OEC taken to address this growing environmental challenge?

In 2025, OEC released a Playbook for Communities Facing Large-Scale Development in Ohio. The toolkit equips local leaders and governments with resources to shape projects like data centers, including community engagement strategies, sample community benefits agreements, and model ordinances.

Late last year, OEC hired its first Central Ohio Regional Director, Annalisa Rocca, to focus on sustainable growth in the region. She recently presented evidence on the environmental impacts of hyperscale data centers to Columbus City Council, receiving positive feedback. Additionally, OEC's Public Lands attorney helped oppose a proposed development near Cedar Bog, leading to a 12-month moratorium in Urbana while environmental and community impacts are evaluated.

In January, OEC's Law Center opposed Ohio EPA's proposed general permit for data center wastewater discharges, arguing it failed to meet Clean Water Act requirements and improperly applied a general permit to an emerging industry with variable environmental impacts.

In February, we hired a legal intern focused on data center research, formed an internal rapid response team, and established policy pillars to coordinate our approach to data center policy and legislation.

Upcoming work includes strengthening community response efforts and hosting a May virtual policy briefing for lawmakers.

OEC Data Center Policy Platform

Pillar I: Increase Data Center Industry Transparency

Ohio should be requiring increased transparency and public disclosure related to data centers.

Pillar II: Protect Communities & Limit State Preemption on Data Centers

Ohio should continue allowing local governments to regulate data centers so each community can make its own decisions regarding their environmental and economic needs.

Pillar III: Conduct Comprehensive Planning & Impacts Analysis

Ohio should adopt more comprehensive planning and impacts analysis related to data centers to better support local communities.

Pillar IV: Protect Consumers & Ensure Reliable Water and Energy

Ratepayers should be protected from bearing increased Utility Costs from data centers.

Pillar V: Conserve Energy, Water & Land

Data centers should be required to conserve water and energy resources. Increase funding for monitoring the data center industry and existing and future water demands. Protect public lands and high-quality natural areas.

- **Empowering communities with practical tools**
Our OEC data center tools are now actively used by communities across Ohio, giving local leaders the knowledge and structure needed to engage effectively. These tools are directly linked to our playbook, translating statewide strategy into local action.
- **Driving regulatory accountability**
Submitted formal comments to the Ohio EPA on industrial water withdrawals, joining hundreds of public voices—but standing out by grounding concerns in science, policy expertise, and long-term water stewardship.

THE DARBY ACCORD: SAVING VITAL STREAMS FOR THE FUTURE



Doug Babcock
Managing Director of Water Policy

I was recently in Florida for the Scotts Miracle-Gro Foundation's National Partnership Network meetings. There, we visited Tampa Bay Watch, which is dedicated to fostering a healthy Tampa Bay watershed through community-driven restoration projects, educational programs, and outreach initiatives. They have done tremendous work saving and restoring Tampa Bay. They have dolphins.

Our work saving the Big Darby would be easier if we had dolphins. Dolphins are cute, smart mammals that interact and connect with humans. They also make great stuffed animals. They capture a child's imagination. But the Darby has something as important to our ecosystem as dolphins are to Tampa Bay. We have mussels.

In fact, the Darby has more than 44 different varieties of mussels. They include the Clubshell, Northern Riffleshell, Rabbitsfoot, Snuffbox, and Rayed Bean. If you count the fish and the mussels, 38 species are listed as endangered or rare. And, there is always the salamander.

How do you get people excited about bivalve mollusks? Save the mussel, save the Darby. It starts with education. Before you advocate, you must educate. And just as mussels are key to a healthy ecosystem, they are key to our ability to save the Darby.

The Big and Little Darby Creeks are some of the most important streams not just in Ohio, but in the entire Midwest and the nation. The Darby Watershed is an outstanding natural resource home to a nationally significant assemblage of rare and imperiled aquatic biodiversity. Both the Big and Little Darby Creeks are federally listed as National Scenic Rivers. But their health is declining. And anticipated urban development threatens their futures.

The Darby covers 557 square miles of Central Ohio. It is Central Ohio's last great place, and it is



under tremendous pressure. In 2006, 10 jurisdictions set out to protect the Darby watershed in Franklin County while supporting responsible development. It was quite an achievement. After 20 years and much success, we have learned a lot, and the Great Darby Accord is facing a rewrite.

Now, we are looking at a new Darby Accord. Something we should all support, if done correctly. We do not need to pit development against the environment. We can do both, but we must follow the science, secure buy-in from all parties, and ensure we protect the land that needs protection. We can have it all in Central Ohio; we just need to do so responsibly.

As the Accord faces a rewrite, we have to acknowledge that protecting the Darby is a full-time job. And it requires an entire watershed approach. But it all starts with education and those pesky mollusks.

Join us as we set out on a course that seeks to protect Central Ohio's last great place. And, while we may not have dolphins, we have you. And together, we can make a difference, protect the Darby, and ensure a healthy future for everyone.

WAYNE NATIONAL FOREST FRACKING LITIGATION



Nathan Johnson
Senior Attorney for Land & Water



Molly Jo Stanley
Southeast Ohio Regional Director

I (Nathan) became an environmental public interest attorney because I believe the law can be a shield for places that cannot speak for themselves. The OEC's fight to protect the Wayne National Forest from unlawful fracking is now ten years in. We have won critical victories—but the fight is far from over.

When our effort began in 2016, there was little analysis of what fracking would mean for local streams, wildlife habitat, or nearby rural communities. The forest, though federally protected on paper, was being treated as an industrial sacrifice zone. Our role was to force accountability where the process had failed.

In 2020 and 2021, our hard work paid off with court rulings requiring federal agencies to follow their own laws. Judges agreed that leasing approvals had ignored basic environmental safeguards, including meaningful analysis of forest fragmentation, air pollution, and stream impacts. These rulings halted drilling plans and sent agencies back to the drawing board. For the forest itself, that pause mattered. Streams

continued to run clear. Trails stayed open. We protected sensitive habitats from destruction and prevented harmful air pollution for the public.

In 2025, the Trump Administration issued a new, deeply flawed environmental review and unilaterally declared that the injunction halting the leasing project had dissolved. The OEC is back in court fighting this unlawful project. Our legal briefs are in, and the stakes are high. The agencies' figures show that this fracking project could cancel out the entire national forest's carbon sequestration for thirty years. Those figures also show that the project could generate nearly as much coarse particulate matter as the entire oil and gas industry in the state.

Today, fracking has not begun in this forest. That is something to celebrate. Yet the legal protections we rely on are only as durable as our willingness to defend them. The opposing pressure has not disappeared; it has simply regrouped. As an environmental public interest attorney, I have learned that success often looks less like a final victory and more like sustained vigilance.

The fight for justice never ends, and protecting public lands is not a one-time act. It is a continual effort to ensure that the promises of the law are honored—to conserve these places not just for profit or politics, but for the generations who will walk beneath these trees long after our briefs are filed.



WE MUST CHANGE HOW OHIO DECISION-MAKERS THINK ABOUT ELECTRIC GENERATION



Chris Tavenor
General Counsel

For the past decade, the Ohio Environmental Council has supported utility-scale renewable projects at the Ohio Power Siting Board. Whether we're intervening in groundbreaking energy projects like a proposed offshore wind facility or an 800-megawatt solar project paired with row crop agriculture, we push for clean energy that mitigates the causes of climate change.

What is the problem we're facing?

Since the passage of Senate Bill 52 in 2021, Ohio has seen a significant increase in opposition to renewable energy. Residents are often understandably concerned about how a project will transform their community. Other times, oil and gas interests covertly fund legal opponents to renewables.

At the OEC, we believe all people should have the opportunity to use their voices to provide important perspectives to decisionmakers, even if we disagree with them. Instead, we're seeing decisionmakers grant complete deference to local opponents of utility-scale renewable projects, all while ignoring the substance of these concerns and important local and statewide perspectives regarding electric generation in Ohio.

The Ohio Supreme Court recently rejected this practice in the case called South Branch Solar. The Court found local opposition "informative" to an Ohio Power Siting Board decision, but not determinative. Just weeks later, in legal cases before the Ohio Power Siting Board, we witnessed arguments that continued to push decisions that solely relied on local opposition, without consideration of local or statewide benefits from solar. They essentially ignored the Supreme Court's guidance.

The OEC Law Center believes this approach might create a problematic precedent: if local opponents to an electric generation facility can be loud enough to get support from the right politicians,



any electric generation facility in Ohio can be killed—whether it's solar, wind, or any other form of energy.

And to stop climate change, we need more renewable energy. To decrease electricity costs for Ohioans, we need new, modern forms of electric generation. We need careful, fact-based consideration of power siting, not complete deference to the loudest voices in the room.

So how do we fix this problem?

The problem lies at the heart of the Ohio Power Siting Board process: the word "public interest" is not clearly defined. Ohio law requires a project to meet the "public interest." The Ohio Supreme Court has provided a flexible definition, but some decisionmakers continue to operate on a narrow definition that merely tallies local comments.

The Ohio General Assembly could pass a bill changing the definition to better reflect the statewide benefits of electric generation. Otherwise, we will continue to see good projects rejected based on disinformation. The OEC Law Center is engaging directly in this effort to ensure Ohio builds the renewable energy it desperately needs to protect the environment and improve the health of our communities.



Learn more about our work on Utility-Scale Solar on our website.



SUPPORT OEC'S WORK TODAY



Lainie Rini
Membership Engagement Manager

Thanks to you, the Ohio Environmental Council is the most effective environmental advocate in Ohio, combining science, policy, and legal defense to ensure the places we love can thrive for generations to come. There are many ways you can make an even greater impact to protect Ohio for all who call it home!



Become a Green Giving Club supporter

By joining our Green Giving Club as a monthly sustainer, you can double your impact and power our long-term work. With monthly support, you represent our best hope for a safer and more abundant future. To learn more, please visit theoec.org/donate/give-monthly.



Join the Impact Partners

This passionate group is building a brighter future for Ohio. Impact Partner members make a contribution of at least \$1,000 per year. Benefits include a dedicated staff liaison, quarterly Insider Updates, and special acknowledgements.

GREEN GALA 2026 CELEBRATING HOPE IN ACTION

A *special thank you* to the OEC's generous sponsors for supporting our 2026 celebration on May 9!

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CITATIONS ¹Md Abu Bakar Siddik et al 2021 Environ. Res. Lett. 16 064017



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About the Cover: The cover image was shot by Riley Dean, OEC's Political Affairs Manager, on her Ohio To Erie Trail bikeride in August of 2025. The image is of the Cuyahoga River taken in Peninsula, Ohio.



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- Action Briefings Webinar Series
- Green Gala
- Law Conference
- Annual Meeting
- OEC In Your Area Series
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