

**ELPC NW Ohio Poll**  
**April 15-18, 2021**  
**SELZER & COMPANY**

Selzer & Company conducted a poll of 506 registered voters in four northwestern counties in Ohio: Erie, Lucas, Ottawa, and Sandusky. The poll had several purposes:

- To find out how much voters know about water issues related to agricultural pollution particularly from CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations) in this part of the state;
- To measure support for and opposition to proposals to change state rules on CAFOs so more of them would be subject to regulation and to put in place enforceable regulations to limit runoff from CAFOs and commercial fertilizers;
- To gauge support for and opposition to a proposal for a moratorium on new construction of CAFOs;
- To assess messages both for and against a freeze on their construction;
- To understand how these issues might resonate among registered voters in upcoming elections; and
- To see how opinions on Lake Erie water issues may have changed since we last studied this part of Ohio in 2019.

**OVERVIEW**

The findings build on research in NW Ohio over the last few years, adding depth to previously promising results.

Based on these poll findings, it is hard to imagine a more receptive audience for regulatory proposals than are evident among registered voters in NW Ohio. A whopping 78% favor requiring permits for *all* CAFOs, regardless of size. As impressive, 81% favor turning away from voluntary programs for pollution reduction and instituting enforceable regulations to reduce manure and fertilizer runoff from CAFOs. In both cases, a majority *strongly* agrees. A freeze on CAFOs continues to win support from most NW Ohio voters, but from a smaller majority of 55%.

We tested the idea of increased “regulations” specifically to incite a negative reaction, if there were to be one under the theory that it is better to know than not. If 78% and 81% include any

knee-jerk anti-regulation reaction, then the proportion with that kind of reaction is small. It is clear, for these issues, there is not that much of a tilt toward resisting regulations.

This gives ELPC three solid arrows in its quiver: Stop new construction, require permits for all CAFOs, and require and enforce regulations to reduce pollution from manure and fertilizer runoff.

Candidates would do well to align themselves with the best interests of Lake Erie. That does not begin at the shoreline. It begins upstream. This part of the story is not widely known in NW Ohio, but when it is told, it is powerful. A majority of voters say this will be a major issue as they consider candidates to support. And, by a huge 7-to-1 margin, voters prefer a candidate who prioritizes Lake Erie's health.

## KEY FINDINGS

1. **Clean water in general is as important as ever—and so is cleaning up Lake Erie, specifically (Q.1).** A huge proportion of NW Ohio registered voters say access to safe clean water is very important. That is almost the same high percentage as said so two years ago (87% now, compared to 88% in 2019). Another 6% say it is fairly important, for a total of 93% (compared to 92% in 2019).

Asked about cleaning up Lake Erie, a total of 86% say this is very (71%) or fairly (15%) important.

These issues rank above health care (82% say very or fairly important), jobs and wages (78%), and COVID-19 (75%).

Climate change attracts a 56% majority saying it is very (42%) or fairly (13%) important. That is down from 65% in 2019. At least half of key demographic groups see this as very important: Democrats (72%), lower income voters (51%), and the youngest age cohort (50% of those under age 35). These same demographics are more likely to say each issue is very important than the overall average, so this is not all that telling.

Only the FirstEnergy utility scandal ranks lower, with 44% saying this is very or fairly important. This includes a slightly higher proportion of age 65 and older saying it is very important (37%, compared to 31% overall).

2. **As respondents learn more about CAFOs, they are more inclined to favor a freeze on new construction.** Initially, 46% favor the proposed freeze, with 35% opposing; 19% were not sure (Q.3a). Those findings are similar to what we saw in 2019.

Given a bit more information—specifically that there is no limit on the number of CAFOs that can be built in the state of Ohio—55% favor a ban on building new CAFOs; 36% oppose and 9% were not sure (Q.5). That is an uptick of 9 percentage points.

Toward the end of the interview after arguments for and against a freeze and increased regulation, respondents favored these actions in larger proportions. Asked about a freeze, 60% favored, 33% opposed and 7% were not sure (Q.10). That is another uptick of 5 percentage points.

In the initial test, meant to reflect a cold read on several legislative issues, there is very little meaningful partisan divide on any of the legislative topics tested early in the poll. That includes the initial question on the CAFO moratorium. The lone exception is about instituting new restrictions on early and absentee voting: 70% of Republicans favor this action, compared to 25% of Democrats. Independents all but match the overall number (44%, compared to 43%, respectively).

3. **Addressing runoff from manure and fertilizers draws greater support than a CAFO construction freeze.** Asked about putting in place enforceable regulations to limit runoff from CAFO waste and commercial fertilizers, the findings were lopsided and seemingly unmovable. This question was asked twice. Initially, 81% favored this action, while 13% opposed and 5% were not sure (Q.7). Later, the numbers are about the same: 82% favor, 13% oppose, and 5% are not sure (Q.11).

In the cold ask, early in the interview, there is virtually no light between partisans; 77% of Republicans favor enforceable regulations on manure and fertilizers; it's 84% for Democrats and 85% for independents.

The freeze on CAFO construction elicits more partisan reaction than does enforceable regulation on fertilizers. In the cold ask (Q.3a), minorities of Republicans (44%) and Democrats (43%) favor the freeze (with 54% of independents saying the same).

That changes in Q.5 when respondents get a bit more information through a series of items in Q.4: A minority of Republicans (42%) favor a freeze, compared to 63% of Democrats.

4. **Three in four favor requiring permits for CAFOs of all sizes (Q.6).** A full 78% say they strongly (52%) or mostly (25%) favor expanding permitting to include all CAFOs. In a show of how universally popular this proposal is, solid majorities of all political parties support this, including 66% of Republicans, 83% of Democrats, and 84% of independents.
5. **Cleaning up Lake Erie wins voter support (Q.12).** Asked to choose between a candidate that prioritizes cleaning up Lake Erie even if it means more regulation and a

candidate who favors allowing current practices and voluntary programs, the findings are 7-to-1 for the candidate prioritizing cleaning up Lake Erie—77-11%. Two years ago, the divide was narrower, with different wording focusing on a construction freeze on CAFOs. Then, it was 59-22% in favor of the pro-freeze candidate.

A majority of 54% say cleaning up Lake Erie will be a major issue for them as they consider candidates to support (Q.13). Another 34% say it will be a minor issue. If anything, this suggests stronger interest in programs that protect Lake Erie than we measured in 2019. Then, 40% said it would be a major issue, though the language was tied more to CAFOs than to the Lake.

**What this means.** The findings of support for CAFO and commercial fertilizer management could be persuasive in and of themselves. The kicker is that this is an easy election issue. Candidates of any stripe would be wary of running against a 66-point margin among NW Ohio voters. Of particular importance is what appears to be a stronger reaction when there is a stronger link between what happens on farms and CAFOs and the consequences for Lake Erie.

We purposefully did two things differently in this survey compared to 2019. First, we widened the scope beyond a freeze on CAFOs. We learned that requiring permits for *all* CAFOs and controlling commercial fertilizers win broader support than a mere freeze.

Second, we intentionally connected CAFO waste and fertilizer runoff to Lake Erie more directly than we did two years ago. The freeze argument is as strong as it was then, but it pales compared to support for regulations to address runoff pollution. Four in five support new regulations, including a majority of 55% who strongly support them (Q.7).

In the mix is the idea of permits. Three in four favor requiring permits for all CAFOs, regardless of size (Q.6). That includes a majority of 52% whose support for permits is strong.

This gives ELPC three solid arrows in its quiver: Stop new construction, require permits for all CAFOs, and require and enforce regulations to reduce pollution from manure and fertilizer runoff.

6. **These impressive findings supporting water quality improvement are not linked necessarily to enhanced awareness (Q.4).** Asked how familiar they are with a list of technical issues surrounding water quality, CAFOs, commercial fertilizers, and such, we see very little change from the 2019 study. Respondents are most commonly aware of algae outbreaks in Lake Erie (68% are very or fairly familiar). No other technical item tested had that level of familiarity among at least half.

**What this means.** NW Ohio voters have not necessarily awakened to issues with the water in Lake Erie. They may have some awareness of algae blooms but are not all that familiar with the causes of those outbreaks in Lake Erie. They do, however, appear to treasure this resource. It appears they do not need to know that much to be convinced to support protective measures addressing CAFOs and commercial fertilizer. Still, some education of the mechanics of what happens on NW Ohio cropland and the consequences for Lake Erie might pave benefit the electorate.

**7. The best-performing arguments in favor of a freeze and enhanced regulation speak to Lake Erie’s economic importance and the danger of polluted water to animals (Q.8).**

The two go hand-in-hand. If the water is harmful—poisonous—to humans, fish, and animals, then that would necessarily do damage to the economy. Two of the four arguments to favor a freeze and adding regulation tested were deemed excellent by a majority:

The situation is dangerous. Fertilizer and manure runoff can end up in Lake Erie, creating toxic algae outbreaks which contaminate drinking water and are poisonous to humans, fish, and animals.	54%
The problem hurts our economy. Lake Erie provides one-third of tourism revenues for the state including sport fishing. The Lake creates over 100,000 jobs and brings in billions of dollars in revenue, so the state needs to protect Lake Erie from toxic algae outbreaks.	53%
Agricultural operations should be held accountable for their runoff pollution from fertilizers and manure that flows into waterways. For every other industry, polluters pay to clean it up. Here, the taxpayers in Toledo, Oregon, and other cities along Lake Erie foot the bill.	40%
The way we’re trying to fix the problem isn’t working. The state of Ohio has spent billions of taxpayer dollars to encourage voluntary pollution reduction, but virtually no progress has been made for cleaning up Lake Erie.	32%

**8. Not one of the arguments against a freeze or added regulation wins excellent ratings from as many as one in four (Q.9).** The strongest argument against is the idea that more research and technology will cure the ills and is a better way forward than regulating and freezing CAFOs.

Instead of added regulation and a freeze on CAFOs, the better way forward would be to invest in research and technology to fix the current problems.	24%
There are a lot of other problems affecting water quality in Lake Erie besides agricultural runoff—things such as lawn fertilizer, soil erosion, and leaking septic tanks. It is wrong to single out one potential problem to take all the blame.	19%
Agriculture is a major job creator in northwest Ohio. If we freeze building new CAFOs and add regulation, that could slow down job growth. We can’t risk that.	10%

---

If regulations are added for CAFOs and fertilizers, the price of food could go up.

9%

**What this means.** The status quo is a threat to humans, fish, and animals. NW Ohio voters are familiar, generally, with toxic algae outbreaks in Lake Erie, and they respond to the idea that situation is dangerous to living beings. They may be less familiar with the sport fishing industry on Lake Erie, but they react to the idea of economic harm resulting from polluted water flowing into the Lake and harming the businesses that rely on it for commerce.

While none of the arguments against a freeze or regulations creates much interest, the strongest message tested pushes back on increasing regulations. Better to solve problems in other ways—namely research and technology—rather than put CAFO owners/operators in a financial bind, it would seem. Noteworthy is that it is still a relative few who react to this as an argument. Even fewer react negatively to proposals that specifically mention increasing regulations.

The lack of movement from before to after hearing these arguments suggest there is little need to overcome existing objections to enhanced permitting and regulation. This is an issue that strikes a resounding chord on its face.

9. **“Regulation” is not that bad a word, these findings suggest.** While there are some who react reflexively to the idea of increasing regulation, in the context of safe, clean drinking water, this is not an automatic response. We see strong majority support (78%, Q.6) for requiring permits for CAFOs, and if anything, stronger majority support (81%, Q.7) for enforceable regulations to limit runoff from CAFO waste and commercial fertilizer.

Because of a concern that describing a position as pro-regulation, we tested two ways to phrase the proposal—as enforceable regulatory *standards*, and as enforceable *regulations* (Q.14). We also invited respondents to say if this difference in phrasing did not matter to them. The findings: Roughly equal proportions opt for standards (29%) as opt for regulations (32%), with the remaining one in three (32%) saying it does not matter.

There are no meaningful demographic differences on this question.

**What this means.** We respect the concept that some voters are anti-regulation, full stop. However, at least in the context of water quality, they are a scant minority—fewer than one in four. Especially as voters think about the threat to organisms and commerce, regulation may be more acceptable, even to those who would normally oppose any and all enhancements to regulations.

10. **This part of the state tilts Democratic, but the Republican governor is popular (Q.2).** Mike DeWine wins approval from a strong 71%. In the previous poll, the new governor

was not known well enough by 17% to judge approval or disapproval. That number has ebbed, which is part of the story of the governor's stellar approval rating. Still, the proportion disapproving has diminished to 22%, from 36% in 2019. His approval number of 71% is up from 47%—a gain of 24 percentage points. Strikingly, his approval among Democrats is 78%, higher than the 62% awarded by Republicans.

No other person or organization tested comes close to this showing. Democratic U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown wins 54% approval, better than Republican Rob Portman's 43%. These are both on par with our previous poll. Democrat U.S. Representative Marcy Kaptur wins majority support, 58%, which is better than Republican Jim Jordan, 36%. Kaptur's job approval, however, is down five points from two years ago, while Jordan's is up six.

President Joe Biden garners majority approval (56%), with 39% disapproving. This is a dramatic showing compared to then-President Trump in 2019 when only one in three (34%) approved and a majority of 59% disapproved of the sitting president. Biden's solid standing is driven by near-universal approval from Democrats (94%); just 8% of Republicans approve. These numbers resemble what we normally see in these polarized times. DeWine's numbers are an aberration.

Others tested include Toledo mayor Wade Kapszukiewicz with a 51-17% approve-to-disapprove ratio and the Ohio Farm Bureau at 43-8%. Almost half (49%) do not know the Bureau well enough to offer a rating. The mayor's rating is driven by voters in Lucas County (63%). About that proportion of voters across the other three counties (65%) do not know him well enough to offer an evaluation.

- 11. Climate change wanes amid new challenges to health care in the time of pandemic (Q.1).** While a majority (56%) say it is very or fairly important to them personally that government action be taken regarding climate change, it is down from 65% two years ago. Then, a majority of 55% said it was *very* important; that number is 42% in the current poll. The proportion claiming health care is very or fairly important is virtually unchanged at 82% (83% in 2019). So is the perceived importance of access to safe clean water (93%, +1 from two years ago). It is not surprising to see three in four rating jobs and wages (78%) and the COVID-19 pandemic (75%) very or fairly important. These issues are new or recast after a year of COVID-19 restrictions.

Democrats are far more likely (83%) to rate climate change as important than Republicans (25%). Lucas County voters are also more on board (60%) than are voters in the other three counties in this poll (46%).

**Summary.** In past research, we've documented voters' negative reactions to algae outbreaks. We also saw evidence of a strong affinity for Lake Erie. The missed connection is understanding the threat posed by manure and fertilizers running off into the Lake. This

questionnaire more directly made that connection, and the responses supporting regulation to address issues from agriculture to the Lake are strong.

These voters do not show any great leap forward in familiarity with the mechanics of CAFOs and the effects on water quality since we last polled this population in 2019, and perhaps they do not need to. The surface narrative that manure and fertilizers threaten Lake Erie may be a shorter story to compel voters to consider candidates who pledge to do more. The idea of adding regulations dissuades few from wanting to protect water quality; these data suggest tiptoeing or soft-peddalling the language is not needed.

Climate change is, if anything, of relatively less importance to voters in NW Ohio. It may seem more of an abstract idea in the time of COVID, so less immediate. Whatever the reason, the path forward to enforceable regulation of CAFOs and fertilizers need not get bogged down by arguments about climate change. With this research, we've uncovered a bond to the Lake that can result in electoral support when the threat from CAFOs and fertilizers is demonstrated. That is sufficient for now.