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Statement of Commissioner Paula Brooks regarding Climate Impacts and the Toledo Water Emergency

As life, we hope, begins to regain a sense of normalcy for more than half a million people in Northwest Ohio, I want to commend Lucas, Fulton and Wood Counties, and all the businesses and residents of Toledo, their mayor, council and staff, and surrounding governments, for the calm, sensible manner in which they handled the “Water Emergency” over the weekend. This showed great resilience, the hallmark characteristic our communities all need. It is a shining example of what we can accomplish when we unite for a common purpose.

Even still, scores of people, including vulnerable babies and senior citizens, sought medical help during the water emergency. Lake Erie alone is the source of fresh water for more than 11 million people, including 3 million Ohioans, and one of our country’s most strategic natural resources, which we share with Canada as well.

This is an urgent wakeup call for all Ohioans across the Great Lakes region, and indeed for our state and whole nation. Sometimes, waking up is hard to do, but in this case, we simply cannot afford to hit the “snooze button.” The stark reality is last weekend’s emergency has the potential to become a common occurrence – perhaps occurring even yet, again this year.

Toxic blue-green algae blooms, the likely source of the contaminants in the City of Toledo’s water supply, are a byproduct of sewage and agricultural runoff into streams and tributaries. However, a key contributor to the more frequent occurrence of these toxic blooms – a contributor that has been largely overlooked in coverage of the emergency – is climate change.

As Ohio’s only appointee to the bipartisan White House Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience, I was briefed by the President’s chief science and technology advisor, Dr. John Holdren in May regarding the 2014 National Climate Assessment. We learned that the Midwest and Great Lakes Region has experienced a huge 37 percent increase in inundations – hard, fast rains that can batter both urban areas and agricultural lands – since 1958.¹ These inundations carry topsoil, and fertilizers and other chemicals along with it, into the waterways, overwhelming our aged water and sewer infrastructure.

The increase in inundations combine with projected average temperature rise of up to 10 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the century,² to make the shallow western basin of Lake Erie even more susceptible to these toxic algae “dead zones.” This problem is not limited to Lake Erie, as blooms have cropped up across Ohio, including at Grand Lake St. Mary’s in Mercer and Auglaize Counties, as well Licking County’s Buckeye Lake and Delaware and Franklin Counties’ Hoover Reservoir. Additionally, these toxic blooms have the potential to threaten all of the Great Lakes’ fresh water supply for multi-millions of people.

We must use this “after action” time to take stock of the lessons learned from the Toledo “Water Emergency,” and utilize the vast data and scientific research available, such as the new National Oceanic

¹ Melillo, Jerry M., Terese (T.C.) Richmond, and Gary W. Yohe, Eds., 2014: Highlights of Climate Change Impacts in the United States: The Third National Climate Assessment. U.S. Global Change Research Program, 6 pp.

² *Ibid*, 28 pp.

and Atmospheric Administration tools, also briefed by Commander Katherine Sullivan to the Task Force. These tools are available now at <http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/cdo-web/>.

Yes, we need to continue to take steps to curb the runoff of potentially harmful fertilizers and sewage into our waterways. However, we also cannot ignore the climate impacts that are exacerbating the problem. We must take action on climate now, for the people of Northwest Ohio, all of Ohio, the entire Great Lakes region, our nation, and our future generations.