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Editorial

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Wetlands could fix pollution from farms

Persuading farmers to set aside productive land and restore it to swamp conditions will be an uphill slog, even for Bill Mitsch, an Ohio State University professor emeritus who is one of the world's foremost experts on wetlands and the pollution that results when they're absent. But all those who are sincere in their desire to fight the sickening, bright-green algae blooms that choke the life out of Lake Erie and other bodies of water most years should listen.

While industrial pollution and sewage contribute to the algae blooms, excess fertilizer running off of farm fields is by far the largest contributor. Mitsch believes temporarily re-establishing wetlands and returning them to cultivation after a few years can reduce the flow of phosphorus into streams by 40 percent.

Joe Cornely, spokesman for the Ohio Farm Bureau, said "I think there are a lot of other ways to go about fixing the problem that are not quite so dramatic." If so, farmers should come forward with those solutions. Ohioans haven't forgotten the super bloom of 2014 that invaded Toledo's water-intake plant and left the city without drinkable water for three days. If climate change makes the algae problem worse, as expected, people will demand radical change.

Mitsch's research project could provide a critical head start.