

EECONEWS

Teaching Controversial Issues

Spring 2012

Volume XXXI

Issue 2



A Grantmaker's Perspective on Teaching Controversial Issues

Carolyn Watkins, Ohio EPA, Administrator of the Ohio Environmental Education Fund

Grantmakers like to support opportunities for students to investigate real-world problems, and explore multiple perspectives on what should be done about them in the process of developing their own informed opinions. We also prefer to see students consulting original research and information sources, not some policy wonk's interpretation. As we are fond of saying, good EE should be about teaching kids how to think, not what to think.

A high school science teacher sent us a draft grant application for a project on climate change. The only reference materials mentioned were the online K-12 lessons created to accompany Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth*. When we started to point this out as a major deficiency in the application, the teacher confessed that she intended to include a number of additional materials that would provide the students with different perspectives, but that she had been in a hurry to submit the draft and hadn't fleshed out those details. After some revisions, she was eventually successful in getting support from both sources, and she learned some important lessons about not seeking funds prematurely, and demonstrating a balance of perspectives.



A few years earlier, we received a grant proposal from a school in a rural community that was bitterly divided over a proposed national wildlife refuge surrounding a high-quality stream. The area was undergoing rapid economic development, with the potential to pollute the stream. OEEF peer reviewers gave high marks for having students investigate such a topical issue, but also expressed concern that the proposal appeared to be biased in favor of the refuge. The applicant went back to the drawing board, and re-worked the project to combine both science and language arts components. In addition to sampling the stream, the students would conduct

a content analysis of testimony, speeches and publications from groups on different sides of the issue, to better understand the arguments for and against the proposed refuge. The students would then present the results of their stream monitoring and their content analysis to the local community. The re-submitted grant was funded, and the inter-disciplinary project was successful in helping the students understand that there was actually strong consensus within the community about the importance of protecting the stream, and legitimate differences of opinion about whether public or private ownership of land was the better tool to use to protect it.

Any grantmaker would like to be associated with projects that lead students to respect differences of opinion. As OEEF distributes public funds, we must draw a bright line between environmental education and environmental advocacy. Controversial environmental issues can be great vehicles to help students understand how public policy is made and how our governmental institutions work. Project Wild's *Science and Civics: Sustaining Wildlife* and Project Learning Tree's secondary education modules provide excellent examples of how to do this well. Projects that advocate a particular course of action are not appropriate for public funding, though some foundations and private funders consider them.

By all means, challenge your students to explore controversial issues. Before you submit that grant application, though, try standing on one foot to see how long you can keep your "balance."

SAVE THE DATE

OEEF Grant Submission

July 15 Deadline

Language of Nature

Cuyahoga Valley N. P.

July 22- 27

EE Certification Class Application Deadline

Aug 31

101 Alternatives to Chalkboard

YMCA Camp Kern

Oct 5-7

Winter Snow Eco-Arts

Camp NuHop

Feb 1-2

EECO Conference

Mohican State Park

April 11- 14

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Regional Priorities

- Region 1: urban/multicultural, language arts
- Region 2: high school, environmental careers
- Region 3: social studies, environmental careers
- Region 4: urban/multicultural, environmental careers
- Region 5: pre-service teachers
- Region 6: language arts
- Region 7: adult education
- Region 8: urban/multicultural, environmental careers
- Region 9: pre-service teachers, high school
- Region 10: high school, environmental careers
- Region 11: adult education, environmental careers
- Region 12: early childhood, urban/multi-cultural

Get in Touch

Contact information for your area's regional director can be found on the back page and online at www.eeco-online.org



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For more information on these grants, Please contact:

Ohio EPA Office of Environmental Education

Phone: 614/644-2873

Email: oeef@epa.state.oh.us

Website: www.epa.ohio.gov/oeef



The next application deadline is July 15, 2012.

Information is posted at www.epa.ohio.gov/oeef

Recent Grants for the General Public Audience

Friends of the Lower Olentangy Watershed, “Olentangy Urban Rainscapes,”

\$46,728, Franklin County, Laura Fay, info@olentangywatershed.org, 614-267-3386.

As part of a brownfield housing redevelopment of an older, low-income urban neighborhood, this pilot program will install residential rainscaping to manage urban storm water, and water conservation devices inside new housing to reduce water consumption. Porch chats, interviews, workshops and signs will involve 247 residents of Columbus’ Weinland Park neighborhood in learning about, creating and maintaining front yard and curbside rain gardens, rain barrels, and bioswales, to reduce their watershed footprint, build community pride, and provide superior housing for new low income home buyers.

Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, “Balancing Growth and Conservation,”

\$26,608, Belmont, Butler, Delaware, Fayette, Licking, Madison, Mahoning, Marion, Miami, Morrow, Pickaway, Ross, Union, Washington, and Wood Counties, Brian Williams, bwilliams@morpc.org, 614-233-4187.

This project will use one of the products from a previous OEEF Outstanding Project educating central Ohio residents, farmers and local officials about how to combine farmland preservation with smart growth. MORPC will offer a series of 15 workshops for local elected officials and stakeholders to illustrate effective balanced growth planning with the dual goals of strengthening agricultural economic development while preserving agricultural land and open space. This project will concentrate on preserving farmland through the economic viability of farms, especially in the production, processing and distribution of food for local consumption. A printed and online tool kit will also be provided.

Franklin Soil and Water Conservation District, “Gardening for Clean Water,”

\$47,056, Franklin and Delaware Counties, Stephanie Suter, ssuter@franklinswcd.org, 614-486-9613.

Watershed action plans in central Ohio identify storm water runoff as a primary cause of local water quality impairments. Central Ohio garden centers report a growing number of customers asking for information on native plants, rain barrels and rain gardens. Through workshops, technical consultation, printed and Web-based materials, this program will educate garden center staff, gardeners and residents about on-site storm water infiltration practices as a means of lessening adverse environmental impacts from storm water so customers can make informed decisions about the best course of action for their site.

Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation, “Mineral Springs Avenue Demonstration Block,”

\$15,550, Mahoning County, Liberty Merrill, lmerrill@yndc.org, 330-480-0423.

Provides site enhancements and programs on a city block that recently held 12 abandoned homes, to showcase vacant land reuse strategies. Improvements include a community garden with a fruit orchard, rain garden, soil research garden, permaculture food forest, native wildflower plantings and a demonstration of lead removal and vacant land stabilization. The project includes educational signage, a series of six workshops and an on-site educator. A Community Action Guide will also be created, providing a start to finish guide for groups looking to implement their own vacant land reuse strategies.

Ironton In Bloom, Inc., “Native Plant Landscaping in Lawrence County,”

\$5,000, Lawrence County, Eric Boyda, ericboyda@ironfurnacecwma.org, 740-534-6578.

Provides a native plant garden demonstration walkway in a highly visible area located at the St. Mary’s Medical Campus on community owned property. Interpretive signs, publications and videotaped local workshops will educate residents about the benefits of native plants in gardening and landscaping, the positive relationship between native plant species and native pollinators, and the negative impacts of non-native and invasive plant species.

Recent Grants for the General Public Audience

Cuyahoga Soil and Water Conservation District, “Watershed-Friendly Stream Maintenance for Communities,”

\$16,031, Cuyahoga County, Jared Bartley, jbartley@cuyahogawcd.org, 216-524-6580.

Communities in the Rocky River Watershed are struggling with stream maintenance issues, such as eroding stream banks, clogged culverts, and debris jams. Communities are often caught unaware and forced to scramble to address these problems. This project will develop a community stream maintenance guide, pilot project and series of workshops to help 11 communities in the Rocky River watershed implement proactive programs that fulfill regulatory requirements and meet community needs while protecting the ecological function and value of the stream system.

Cleveland Metropolitan Park District, “Watershed Volunteer Program,”

\$44,950, Cuyahoga County, Jennifer Grieser, jmg2@clevelandmetroparks.com, 440-331-8679.

In surveys, local residents are indicating a willingness to implement beneficial storm water and watershed management practices, but a lack of knowledge about how to do so. This project hands-on training for a network of volunteers and community leaders. Interactive modules, workshops, site tours, poster sessions and on-site projects will include rain garden installation, riparian buffer planting projects, bioswale maintenance, and monitoring techniques using tools such as the HHEI/HMFEI indices, First Flush, photo monitoring, Bank Erosion Hazard Index, Stream Feature Inventory, and pebble count.

Ohio State Parks, “Middle Bass Island Interpretive Trail,”

\$2,000, Lucas and Ottawa Counties, Dana Bollin, dana.bollin@dnr.state.oh.us, 419-836-9117.

Provides a series of interpretive signs on environmental issues and natural history of the area, along a nature trail in a new campground and marina area being developed in Middle Bass Island State Park. Sign information will include the geologic history of the islands and the exposed glacial grooves, the importance of protecting the island's wetlands, and the importance of the island's natural areas to migrating songbirds and resident wildlife. Information conveyed will benefit island residents, several thousand annual park visitors, and hundreds of transient boaters.

Owens State Community College – Workforce and Community Service, “Greening One Village & East Toledo,”

\$4,314, Lucas County, Michael Bankey, michael@owens.edu, 567-661-7735.

Replicates a previously successful home energy efficiency seminar at no cost for residents of older homes in low-income neighborhoods of north and east Toledo. Participants in the four half-day seminars will practice caulking and sealing techniques, heat shrink window installation, and exercises comparing purchase and operating costs of various appliances and equipment. United North and the East Toledo Family Center are collaborating to host the seminars, and follow up with the participants to share their money- and energy-saving experiences.

Tinkers Creek Watershed Partners, “Tinkers Creek Watershed Awareness Sign Project,”

\$4,000, Cuyahoga, Portage, & Summit Co., Babette Oestreich, babette@tinkerscreekwatershed.org, 216-789-6479.

Provides signs marking watershed boundaries along roads in six communities of the Tinkers Creek Watershed, which drains 96.4 square miles and is the largest tributary to the Cuyahoga River. The signs are part of a larger public awareness campaign that will include fact sheets, Web pages and exhibits at multiple local events. The signs will also be located on Google maps.

Ohio Invasive Plant Council (OIPC), “Invasive Plant Education for Ohio Citizens,”

\$4,615, Statewide, Cheryl Coon, ccoon@fs.fed.us, 740-753-0558.

The project seeks to increase awareness of 2,000 Ohio citizens about the ecological and economic impacts of invasive plants, through three workshops, presentations, dissemination of printed informational materials, and Website enhancements. Workshops will include identification, reporting, prevention and treatment of invasive plants, landscaping and land management practices, and specific steps that residents can take to control invasives.

Mill Creek Watershed Council of Communities, “Hands Dirty, Feet Wet: Getting to Know the Mill Creek Watershed,”

\$4,893, Butler and Hamilton Counties, Jennifer Eismeier, jeismeier@millcreekwatershed.org, 513-563-8800.

In partnership with communities and environmental organizations in the watershed, MCWCC will distribute two issues of the Voice of the Mill Creek newsletter. An enclosed survey will provide information on residents' baseline level of knowledge and areas of interest which will guide MCWCC in conducting hands-on activities in the Mill Creek that are targeted at residents' stated interests. Planned outreach events include a stream cleanup in the City of Reading, a rain garden tour in the City of Springdale, educational walk along Beaver Run creek highlighting stream restoration, a Mill Creek canoe trip and guided tours of a newly-restored streamside park in Twin Creek Preserve.

Recent Grants for K-12 Education

Mill Creek Restoration Project, “Green Careers and Urban Environments Program”

\$46,400, Hamilton County, Audience: middle and high school, Contact: Lora Alberto, lora@millcreekrestoration.org; 513-731-8400.

Creates a network of 35 environmental professionals to mentor up to 500 Cincinnati 10th-12th grade students on environmental careers and green technologies, using guided tours of LEED-certified buildings, energy conservation and renewable energy projects, brownfields, waste water treatment plants, and environmental offices. Led by a landscape architect and storm water engineers, up to 500 6th-9th grade students will monitor land use and water quality in the Lick Run sub-basin of the Lower Mill Creek watershed, and help design urban stream restoration strategies in the South Fairmount neighborhood. Both groups of students will participate in service learning projects.

Darke County Educational Service Center, “Producing Green Energy in Ohio,”

\$42,358, Auglaize, Darke, Mercer, Miami, Montgomery, Preble, and Shelby Counties, Audience: High School, Dave Shellhaas, dave_shellhaas@darke.k12.oh.us, 937-417-0903.

This pilot project will target 114 teachers and approximately 1,500 high school students from 57 school districts in west central Ohio. The goal of the project is to increase high school students’ skills at making evidence-based decisions about renewable energies that are found or produced in Ohio. A series of workshops, online follow-up and a printed guide will provide teachers with content on biomass, wind and geothermal energy sources currently being developed in western Ohio, and practice leading students in learning to make decisions about energy options without creating bias themselves. Products will include a magazine for students accompanied by audio/video podcasts.

New Philadelphia City Schools- New Philadelphia High School, “Fostering a context of inquiry: Authentic investigations of local ecosystems across grade levels”

\$23,259, Stark and Tuscarawas Counties, Audience: Elementary, Middle and High School, Kip Brady, bradyk@npschools.org, 330-364-0644.

This project will engage 600 fifth, seventh and tenth grade students and their teachers in authentic investigations of local ecosystems. Teachers will obtain wildlife collecting permits from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, and receive nets, waders, buckets and collecting materials to use in local forest, pond and wetland sites. They will investigate and collect local species that are amendable to classroom study, observing their habitats and interactions, and developing questions and experimental designs for their students to investigate these organisms. Participating teachers will also use an online discussion board to compare their efforts during the school year.

Nature Center at Shaker Lakes, “Updating Standards-Based Environmental Science Curricula”

\$18,000, Cuyahoga County, Audience: Elementary School, Kay Carlson, Carlson@shakerlakes.org, 216-321-5935.

This project will bring together a team of eight teachers during the summer of 2012 to help the Center educators and naturalist staff update the curriculum and align it with the revised Ohio Academic Content Standards for science that will go into effect in 2013-14, because a number of topics are moving to different grade levels. The new curriculum will be field tested with 72 classes (eighteen each Kindergarten, 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades) in the 2012-13 school year, evaluated, and implemented in the 2013-2014 school year.

Ohio Sea Grant College Program, F.T. Stone Laboratory, Center for Lake Erie Research, “Lake Erie Water Quality and Nutrient Issues”

\$50,000, Ottawa Co., Audience: University & General Public, Jeffrey M. Reutter, reutter.1@osu.edu, 614-292-8949 Provides monitoring and laboratory equipment to address water quality and nutrient issues that cause harmful algal blooms in Lake Erie. Equipment will be used in undergraduate courses serving 225 students annually, and demonstrated in workshop and field trip programs educating approximately 8,000 participants annually about water quality issues affecting the Lake, including algae, anoxia, and invasive species.

Ohio River Basin Consortium for Research and Education, “Boat of Knowledge Environmental Workshop for Teachers”

\$3,500, Athens County, Audience: High School, Tiao Chang, chang@ohio.edu, 740-593-1462.

The applicant consortium of universities currently has a five-year National Science Foundation grant for a Boat of Knowledge in the Science Classroom (BooKS) project that partners 9 high school teachers with engineering and science graduate students to train the teachers in methods of collecting and analyzing water quality research data. The grant will allow an additional 20 high school teachers to participate in a summer 2012 scientific symposium and water sampling trip on the Ohio River, and to use the program Website and educational materials to introduce their students to careers in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields.

Recent Grants for K-12 Education

Columbus City Schools, Hilltonia Middle School, “STEMtastic Adventures in Nature”

\$4,183, Franklin Co, Middle School. Teresa Marie Bombrys, polaris61@aol.com, 614-657-6649.

Forty 6th, 7th and 8th grade students have been selected from subgroups identified as in need of intervention to participate in a three-year pilot STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Club. These students are field testing backpacks and standards-aligned learning activities on environmental issues, water quality monitoring, Ohio soils, and identification of native Ohio plants and animals for eventual incorporation into the school curriculum. The grant will provide supplies and test kits for the backpacks, an outdoor learning center, student service projects, a nature art exhibit with the school's three feeder elementary schools, and field trips.

Five Rivers MetroParks, “Inquiry Adventures”

\$2,727, Montgomery Co, Elementary, Middle, and High School, Lauren Stayer, lauren.stayer@metroparks.org, 937-277-4178.

Provides a series of three-hour workshops to introduce 40 K-12 teachers to the Parks' Inquiry Adventures Kits (IAK). The teachers will use Miami University's Project Dragonfly QUEST to see how their students can conduct open inquiry investigations of nature in the out of doors: they are taken to a natural area, develop questions on their curiosities, design and conduct experiments to answer those questions, analyze the results, and present their findings to each other. To conduct their experiments, they are provided a kit containing a variety of scientific instruments for exploring and measuring the natural world. After completing the training, teachers can check out the kits for their students, to facilitate inquiry in the MetroParks, or in their own schoolyard.

Mansfield City Schools – Spanish Immersion School, “Learning Garden”

\$3,321, Richland Co, Elementary School. Carmen Gabriel Costa, GCOSTA@mansfield.k12.oh.us, 419-525-6321.

Provides tools and supplies for a 1/4 acre learning garden and greenhouse for hands-on experiential learning. Lessons from nationally recognized curricula will be incorporated. Learning activities are aligned with state Academic Content Standards for science: PreK-K students will observe living and non-living things in local surroundings to investigate the physical and behavioral traits of living things; first and second graders will plan and conduct an investigation into the basic needs of living things, and plant and animal interactions within habitats; third, fourth and fifth graders will observe and investigate behavior, growth, changes and interactions within ecosystems. The community will be involved through open houses, volunteer opportunities, student-led tours, and a farmers' market.

Three Scale Research, Inc., “Online, Interactive, Educational Wetland Map”

\$4,991, Statewide, Elementary School, Ian Sample, isample@threescale.com, 614-754-1022.

Supports development and beta-testing of an online, interactive map of an Ohio wetland for fifth grade students to learn about the water cycle and pollination cycle, the anatomy and behaviors of amphibians, migratory birds, insects and reptiles that live in wetlands, and how decomposers affect water quality. The wetland map will include detailed color illustrations and diagrams; pop-up boxes with educational text, pictures, slideshows, panoramas, links to other educational websites, or videos. Teachers from Olentangy Berkshire Middle and New Bremen Elementary Schools are advising on age-appropriate content and alignment with state science standards. The map will be disseminated statewide and available online at no cost to schools.

New Albany – Plain Local Schools, “Tracking is Science”

\$4,934, Franklin and Licking Counties, High School, Co: Sandy Willmore, swillmore@napls.us, 614-582-9948.

Creates a Wildlife Tracking Expedition as a week-long summer STEM opportunity for 15 students, which will then be incorporated into the curriculum of five classrooms in the fall of 2012. A “What is in Your Back Yard?” program will also be offered to 30 local residents. Participants will learn the basics of reading animal tracks and signs to understand animal behavior, and document their findings using CyberTracker technology, to gain awareness of the presence of wildlife around them, and a better understanding of how human impacts. By blending outdoor learning experiences with hand-held GPS and videoconferencing, students will be able to gather, sort, analyze, report and share their findings with others, using discussion, debate and research to draw connections and conclusions.

Otterbein University Department of English, “Reading the Earth: The Language of Nature”

\$1,522, Statewide, Elementary, Middle, and High School, Terry Hermsen, thermsen@otterbein.edu, 614-823-1893.

Reading the Earth: The Language of Nature is a summer institute designed for 20-30 K-12 science, social studies and language arts teachers to offer hands-on means of blending literacy with the study of the natural world. Teachers spend a week at Cuyahoga Valley National Park's Environmental Education Center, discussing classic and contemporary environmental writers, exploring the park under the guidance of expert naturalists to understand Ohio plant and wildlife communities, writing about nature in outdoor settings, developing and comparing lesson plans for their students. Participants will share writings and teaching activities throughout the school year on a website.

Tips for Teaching Controversial Issues

By Jen Dennison, ODNR: Division of Wildlife

As an educator, especially an environmental educator, teaching controversial topics can be sticky. How do you maintain your “non-biased” educator role and not insert any personal bias? As an educator, we have a duty to make sure that our students are able to think for themselves. So how do you effectively teach controversial issues without becoming controversial? Long-time Ohio EE icon John Hug’s famous essay called “Two Hats” talks about how we have a responsibility to maintain both hats in our careers, rather than one at the expense of the other. An environmental educator is any world citizen who uses information and educational processes to help people analyze the merits of the varied points of view usually present on a given environmental issue. The environmental educator is not the “mediator,” “trade-off specialist” or “negotiator,” but a developer of skills and an information analyst who prepares people who will participate in environmental decision making. In other words, you can have two hats, just be sure to know when to wear the right one. A “non-biased” approach is critical to the sustainability of quality EE.

One excellent source of information for leading a lesson of this type is an article in *Green Teacher’s Teaching Green: The High School Years called Teaching Controversial Issues*. This article, by Pat Clarke, a former Social Studies teacher, provides a four-step strategy for guiding discussions and lessons on controversial issues.

Step 1: What is the issue about? Basically, you need to help your students boil down the issue to the main controversy. “In short, what is this controversy about: values, information, or concepts?”

Step 2: What are the arguments? This is where your students delve into the arguments or positions of the various sides of the issue and determine if the arguments are valid. These arguments can be value-laden and the students can make judgments on validity with this in mind.

Step 3: What is assumed? Students shouldn’t assume that every opinion is legitimate. Some opinions can be based on false information, prejudice, or personal beliefs that have little to no facts to support them. Students will need to investigate these assumptions to determine their validity.

Step 4: How are the arguments manipulated? “This is the stage of the process when questions are asked on the politics of the issue. This step is particularly important for students because it can help them understand how information can be used to influence opinion.” This step will help students determine who is involved, what is the reason for their position, what role do outside influences like the media play, and more.

As the article indicates, students may be less certain of their position after this exercise than before. This is not a bad thing because you have now led them down a path that provides life long skills in investigating issues that will serve them in their personal lives and future careers outside of the classroom; the ultimate goal of any educator.

Green Teacher is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping educators promote environmental awareness among young people. View their many resources at www.greenteacher.com

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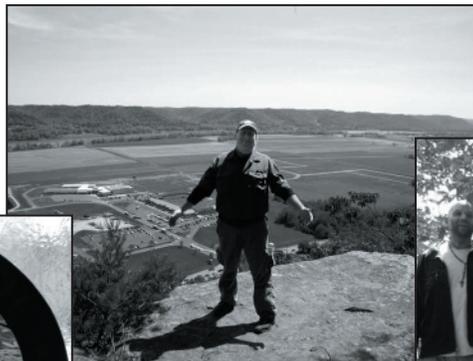
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Green Machine's newspaper tree



Stained glass of river traffic



Hanging out at Raven Rock

Enjoying the hike to Raven Rock



EECO Officers, Advisors & Personnel

Executive Director
Brenda Metcalf
director@eeco-online.org

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Michael Parkes
mparkes@heritage-wti.com

Advisor—ODNR
Jen Dennison
Jen.Dennison@dnr.state.oh.us

President 2010-2011
Joyce Meredith
meredithj@denison.edu

Secretary 2010-2011
Diana Hunn
Diana.hunn@notes.dayton.edu

Advisor—ODE
Dick Dieffenderfer
dick.dieffenderfer@ode.state.oh.us

Vice President 2010-2011
Mary Sheridan
marysheridan@mac.com

Advisor—OEE, OEPA
Carolyn Watkins
carolyn.watkins@epa.state.oh.us

Webmaster
Charleen Race
webmaster@eeco-online.org

Past President 2010-2011
Erv Ball
eball@ccbh.net

Advisor—ODE
Kim Mullen
kimberly.mullen@ode.state.oh.us

Newsletter Editors
Lynn White, Betsy Banks, and
Joe Brehm

EECO Board Members

Betsy Banks
ewb@case.edu

John Hollback
jhollback@aep.com

Gail Prunty
gprunty@geaugaswcd.com

Joe Brehm
joe@ruralaction.org

John Kurtz
johnk@kurtz-bros.com

Paul Spector
pspector@holdenarb.org

Trevor Dunlap
Trevor@
thenuhopcenter.com

Dave Moran
dmoran@daytonymca.org

Chris Stepp
cstepp@athenscity12.oh.us

Ken Green
Green4680@msn.com

Denise Natoli Brooks
denise.natoli.brooks@gmail.com

Lynn White
whitelr@butlercountyohio.org

EECO Regional Directors

Region 1 Linda Pettit
Franklin SWCD
1328 Dublin Rd, Suite 101
Columbus, OH 43215
T: 614-486-9613
F: 614-486-9614
linda-pettit@
franklinswcd.org

Region 5 Sue Magness
Cincinnati Office of Environ-
mental Quality
805 Central Ave
Two Centennial Plaza ,Ste 320
Cincinnati, OH 45202
T: 513/352-5332
F: 513/352-6995
Sue.magness@
cincinnati-oh.gov

Region 9 Patty Rickard
Huston-Brumbaugh Nature
Center
1972 Clark Ave
Alliance, OH 44601
T: 330-829-8988
F: 330-823-8531
rickarpa@mountunion.edu

Region 2 Bunny Rossnagel
Metro Parks of the Toledo
Area
5100 W. Central Ave.
Toledo, OH 43615-2106
T: 419-407-9772
F: 419-407-9785
bunny.rossnagel@
metroparkstoledo.com

Region 6 Joanne Mudra
3421 Schrack Rd.
Lucas, OH 44843
T: 419-892-3521
F: 419-774-6330
jcmudra@gmail.com

Region 10 Bonnie Dailey
Muskingum Valley Park
District
1720 Euclid Ave
Zanesville, OH 43701-2328
T: 740-455-8237
F: 740-455-7939
mvpd@
muskingumcounty.org

Region 3 Dawn Wingate
OSU-Lima, 236 Galvin Hall
4240 Campus Drive
Lima, OH 45804
T: 419-995-8437
F: 419-995-8094
wingate.2@osu.edu

Region 6 Janet Ellsworth
Mansfield City Schools
606 Highridge Rd.
Lexington, OH 44904
T: 419-884-0818
F: 419-525-6389
wellsworth@neo.rr.com

Region 11 Vicki Kohli
Fairfield SWCD
831 College Ave. Ste B
Lancaster, OH 43130-5320
T: 740.653.8154
F: 740.653.4561
vicki.kohli@oh.nacdn.net

Region 4 Donna Lewis
Boonshoft Museum of
Discovery
2600 DeWeese Parkway
Dayton, OH 45414
T: 937-275-7431 ext. 114
F: 937-275-5811
dlewis@
boonshoftmuseum.org

Region 7 Bill Wickerham
Adams SWCD
520 McCarty Rd
West Union, OH 45693
T: 937-217-1906
wickerham.adams.swcd@
live.com

Region 12 Cheryl Mattevi
Kent State University: Salem
831 Highland Ave.
Salem, OH 44460
Tel: 330.337.3956
c.mattevi@att.net

Region 5 Errin Howard
1157 Fashion Ave.
Cincinnati, OH 45238
T: 513-451-5027
herownie@current.net

Region 8 Dawn Wrench
Earth Day Coalition
3606 Bridge Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44113
T: 216/281-6468x225
F: 216/281-5112
dwrench@
earthdaycoalition.org



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