The Ohio Environmental Leaders Institute (OELI) is a forum for environmental professionals and policy makers to learn how to better address complex environmental issues. The Institute engages representatives from public, private and not-for-profit sector organizations in applied and experiential learning settings. The curriculum is focused on environmental sustainability, collaborative process skills, and organizational leadership development.

Sponsors for the Ohio Environmental Leaders Institute include Ohio State University Extension, the School of Environment and Natural Resources, The Dr. Robert W. Teater Endowment Fund, and the Scotts Co. The Institute is coordinated by co-directors Joe Bonnell, Watershed Management Program Director, Ohio State University School of Environment and Natural Resources and Ohio State University Extension, and Maggie Lewis, Lecturer, Ohio State University Fisher College of Business and the Glenn School of Public Affairs. Bonnell and Lewis have a successful track record of designing and delivering program content designed exclusively for environmental professionals, as well as designing consensus building and community engagement initiatives to address contentious environmental conflicts. The project team has also researched and participated in similar initiatives offered in other states. Program faculty include practitioners, policy makers, researchers, and OSU faculty.

Three sessions in Columbus, Ohio on June 6-7, July 21-22 and August 8-9 comprised the Institute programming in 2016. Two subsequent, optional events were available for OELI members: participation in the Columbus Foundation sponsored “Big Table” dialogue on August 30, and an Energy, Environment, Development and Sustainability (EEDS) and OELI networking event on September 23. Twenty-three participants representing public, private and non-profit, advocacy and other partnership organizations were enrolled.
The 2016 curriculum addressed:

- Core principles, best practices and emerging trends in sustainable infrastructure;
- Skill building techniques in communication, conflict resolution and consensus-building to facilitate constructive, respectful dialogue on controversial environmental issues;
- Personal and organizational leadership strategies to direct environmental policy initiatives and inspire change;
- Discussion, networking and partnering opportunities to advance networks focused on effective environmental leadership in Ohio.

In final session evaluations, participants responded:

- All participants "were exposed to new information and perspectives";
- All participants “gained new knowledge and skills”;
- All participants indicated the program “met or exceeded their expectations”;
- All participants would recommend the OELI program to friends and colleagues.

Individuals who are currently leading or who aspire to lead collaborative, inclusive planning and decision making processes that integrate science and public values benefit the most from participating in OELI. Each participant that completes the program joins an expanding leadership network to advance environmental policy discussions in Ohio.

More information about the Ohio Environmental Leaders Institute is available at oeli.osu.edu or by contacting program coordinators, Joe Bonnell, bonnell.8@osu.edu or Maggie Lewis, lewis.933@osu.edu

Photo: 2016 OELI participants at the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium during the July OELI session.