



P.O. Box 278
Riverdale, MD 20738

Committee: Economic Matters

**Testimony on: HB 62 – Land Use – Public Service Companies Pollinator-Friendly
Vegetation Management**

Position: Support

Hearing Date: February 9, 2023

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly supports HB62, which would significantly increase habitat supporting pollinators by reducing the required frequency of mowing under power lines. In addition, by reducing the required mowing frequency, HB62 would tend to reduce utilities' expenses for vegetation management. At the same time, utilities would continue to have flexibility to conduct mowing whenever necessary to support safe and effective management of their systems.

The bill would help address declining populations of pollinating insects – such as bees and butterflies – and birds which are essential to our fruit and vegetable crops and to the wild and ornamental flowers in our gardens and parklands. In North America, nearly a third of all bumblebee species are threatened with extinction, as are twenty percent of butterflies. In Ohio, the number of butterflies flying in any one year has dropped 33 percent. In California, the monarch butterfly population dropped by a staggering 99 percent over the last 40 years. In 2015, Maryland beekeepers lost two-thirds of their honeybee colonies, one of the highest rates in the country. A likely contributor to these declines is loss of the kinds of habitats that these pollinators require: open meadows and grasslands.

In Maryland we have several utility powerlines that run through land managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). FWS wildlife biologists have worked with Pepco and BGE to develop methods of managing these powerlines as bountiful meadow habitat for bees, butterflies, and other wildlife. Studies at the Patuxent Research Refuge and the South River Greenway have shown that – with reduced mowing, among other methods – powerline corridors can become robust meadows supporting nearly 150 species of native bees and 40 species of butterflies. At a small meadow under Pepco powerlines in Chillum (see figures 1 and 2), 21 species of butterflies and 97 species of native bees have been documented.

Despite this great potential, utilities in Maryland currently devote less than five percent of their 2,000 miles of powerline corridors to pollinator habitat, and that limited share of habitat is almost entirely on federal, state, and county parkland. Standing between our utilities and creating more powerline meadows are the restrictive “weed” height ordinances in almost all of our counties. These regulations, originally intended for homeowners, require frequent mowing to maintain grasses and wildflowers at no more than 12 inches in height.

HB62 has the potential to fix this problem by granting utilities a reprieve from local “weed” height ordinances. Importantly, however, this bill preserves county authority to apply their weed ordinances on powerlines whenever there is concern for human health and safety.

We believe this bill has outstanding potential for being a true “win-win” for our state: benefiting the environment and valuable species while simultaneously reducing costs faced by utilities and ratepayers. We urge the Committee to support this bill and recommend its passage by the General Assembly.

Michael Wilpers
Natural Places Committee
wilpersm@gmail.com

Josh Tulkin
Chapter Director
Josh.Tulkin@MDSierra.org

Randolph Lyon
Legislative Chair, Maryland Chapter
randy.lyon@mdsierra.org

References

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Fig. 1. Pepco powerline in Chillum (Prince George's County) before mowing was reduced in 2007 (M. Wilpers photo)

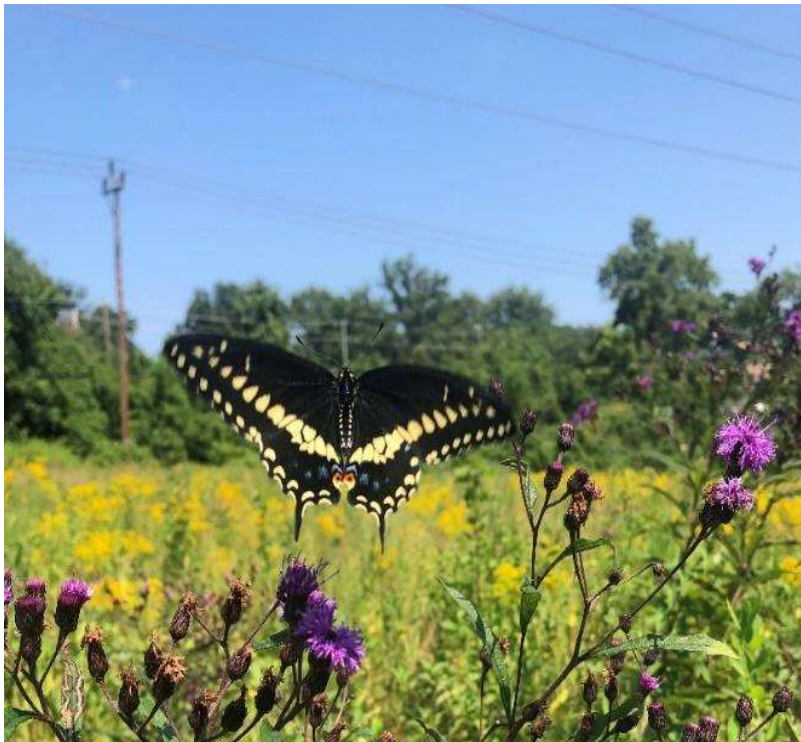


Fig. 2. The same powerline in 2022, after mowing was reduced, with black swallowtail butterfly, ironweed, and goldenrods (K. Zimmer photo)