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Committee: Economic Matters

Testimony on: HB718 “Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard – Eligible Sources – Alterations (Reclaim Renewable Energy Act of 2023)”

Position: Support

Hearing Date: March 9, 2023

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club supports HB718. This bill will remove polluting energy from Maryland’s Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS), including trash incineration, burning of forest resources, poultry litter-to-energy and animal manure-to-energy, and gas produced from the anaerobic decomposition of animal or poultry waste. This will remedy significant environmental and climate issues.

The RPS is among our State’s most important programs for substantially reducing our emissions of climate-disrupting greenhouse gases. As a result of the RPS, Maryland has been turning – albeit too slowly – toward electricity generated by clean, renewable energy sources. The energy sources supported by the RPS include solar, offshore and onshore wind, geothermal energy, ocean energy, and certain hydroelectric energy. It also, however, includes the polluting sources that this bill will remove from the RPS.

The RPS provides financial support to the renewable energy industry by requiring Maryland retail electricity suppliers to purchase a minimum number of Renewable Energy Credits (“RECs”) each year from renewable electricity generators covered by the RPS. A REC constitutes a financial attribute owing to the production of one megawatt-hour of electricity generated from one of the renewable energy sources. The RPS defines the requisite minimum number of RECs in terms of a percentage of the supplier’s energy sales. That percentage currently is slightly above a third, and will rise to 52.5% in 2030.

According to the most recent RPS report prepared by the Public Service Commission, of the electricity sources to be removed from the RPS by this bill, trash incineration is the largest, defined by the number of its RECs being purchased by Maryland electricity suppliers.¹ Trash incineration is not clean or environmentally neutral – it emits climate-disrupting carbon dioxide and other pollutants which cause serious damage to Marylanders’ health. Incineration facilities typically emit more carbon dioxide, dioxin, mercury, nitrogen oxide, and lead than fossil fuel plants. Their residual ash contains high concentrations of harmful toxins including dioxin, mercury, lead, and other heavy metals; these high concentrations rapidly leach into local soil and water.

¹ Public Service Commission, “Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard Report, With Data for Calendar Year 2021” (November 2022), at 10. https://www.psc.state.md.us/wp-content/uploads/CY21-RPS-Annual-Report_Final.pdf.

The trash incinerator in downtown Baltimore causes major damage to the health of the city's residents, producing about a third of all industrial air pollution in Baltimore. It emits a substantial amount of mercury and lead – both known to be critical threats to children's neurologic development. It also is the city's single largest source of pollutants that cause respiratory disease, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides (NOx). Sulfur dioxide triggers acute respiratory irritation, triggering immediate worsening for anyone with an underlying pulmonary disorder, such as COPD. Nitrogen oxides contribute to childhood asthma and are the major source of ground-level ozone (smog) formations that trigger asthma attacks.

The RPS should be focused on incentivizing new, renewable energy facilities which support Maryland's efforts to mitigate climate change. Both trash incinerators in Maryland supported by the RPS began operations well before the RPS's first compliance year, 2006. The Covanta incinerator in Dickerson, Maryland began commercial operation in 1995, and the Wheelabrator incinerator in downtown Baltimore began operation in the 1980s. Maryland's RPS dollars also have been supporting a Covanta incinerator in Fairfax County, Virginia, which began commercial operations in 1990. There is no indication that these facilities require the RPS subsidy in order to remain in operation.

For these reasons, the Maryland Sierra Club urges a favorable report on HB718.

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