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Committee: Budget and Taxation

Testimony on: SB470 “Natural Resources - Land Conservation - Establishment of Goals and Programs (Maryland the Beautiful Act)”

Position: Support

Hearing Date: March 1, 2023

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly supports SB470, the Maryland the Beautiful Act. This bill establishes a state goal of 30% of Maryland lands conserved by 2030 and 40% of lands conserved by 2040. To accomplish this goal the bill authorizes the existing state Smart Growth Subcabinet to develop and update every five years a plan to meet these goals. Within the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), it creates several categories of funding to conserve agricultural, forested, cultural, and historical lands. These programs will be administered by the Maryland Environmental Trust (MET).

The programs include: 1) a \$10 million Local Land Trust Revolving Loan Fund, a one-time 2025 expense, to enable land trusts to quickly secure funds for newly available land and conservation easements and repay the loan at no lower than 1 point below the prime interest rate; additionally, \$235,000 shall be allocated to the MET each year for 2) Land Trust Capacity grants in support of monitoring and stewardship scholarships, equipment, and organizational trainings (\$50,000); 3) Stewardship Grants to land trusts to improve monitoring and stewardship of Maryland’s most important eased agricultural lands, forested lands, or lands facing a high degree of invasive species and/or climate change related threats and damage (\$50,000); and 4) Citizen Stewardship Awards to help community organizations develop innovative solutions to local environmental challenges (\$135,000).

The Maryland the Beautiful bill this year is not completely the same as last year's bill. The ten-million-dollar Local Land Trust Revolving Loan Fund was a component of last year’s bill. However, the tree stewardship funding in the 2022 bill passed last year as part of another bill, and this year a different bill (HB503/SB523, which we also strongly support) addresses creating urban greenspaces, which was part of the 2022 bill. New in this year's bill are the small grants to citizen community groups and land trusts to help these types of organizations maintain and steward these new lands.

The Sierra Club strongly supports this investment in the conservation of lands that help protect our communities from the ongoing effects of climate change. Maryland’s forests and farms provide valuable ecosystem services such as clean water, clean air, timber, pollination of agricultural plants, habitat for fisheries, and flood control.¹ Historically, the ecosystem service benefits of farms and forests did not have clearly established monetary values.² If a forest was logged, the monetary value of the timber was the primary consideration; only recently have the

¹ University of Maryland Extension (2022). [Ecosystem services on forest and agricultural lands of Maryland 2013](#).

² The Wilderness Society (2001). [Economic Value of Forest Ecosystem Services: A Review](#).

goods and services provided by the forests been given a monetary value. There is now greater recognition of the value of forests in absorbing air pollutants such as carbon monoxide, ozone, and particulate matter; reducing stormwater runoff; and offsetting carbon dioxide emissions. Maryland's Department of the Environment reported in the Maryland Forest Carbon inventory, for example, that forests offset 14.8% of state emissions.³

A recent statewide study of changes in forest cover and tree canopy in Maryland found that “protected lands experienced a significantly lower rate of forest loss and a much higher rate of total tree canopy increase compared with statewide rates. We conclude that protection benefits [land] conservation in Maryland.”⁴

In addition to these concrete benefits, this bill will move Maryland closer to the federal government's national goal of 30% of U.S. lands and waters conserved, and wildlife corridors connected by 2030.⁵

A related benefit of conserving more Maryland lands is the beneficial effect on the declining indicators of the state of nature. The first global-scale study of the links between people and nature found that global ecosystems have declined by 47%, 25% of species are threatened with extinction, the biomass of wild mammals has fallen by 82%, and 72% of indicators of nature that are important for quality of life for humans showed declines.⁶ This study found that strengthening environmental laws and their implementation was one of the five most effective levers for stopping these declines. Here in Maryland, according to the DNR's 2015-2025 Maryland State Wildlife Action Plan, “there is clear consensus that the loss and degradation of habitats across the state from unplanned growth and unsustainable consumption remain the primary overarching threat to Species of Greatest Conservation Need, as is true nationwide.”⁷ Given the number and size of the threats, this bill will help address this urgent need in a fiscally responsible manner.

Given the massive challenges of climate change, air and water quality, and species preservation, conserving lands is an excellent value. The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly urges a favorable report for Maryland the Beautiful.

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³ Maryland Department of the Environment (2017). [Maryland Forest Carbon Inventory](#).

⁴ Harry R. Hughes Center for Agro-Ecology, University of Maryland College of Agriculture & Natural Resources, Chesapeake Conservancy, & University of Vermont (November, 2022). [Technical Study on Changes in Forest Cover and Tree Canopy in Maryland](#).

⁵ Sierra Club (N.D.) [30X30 Conservation Agenda](#).

⁶ Diaz, S. et al. (20219). [Pervasive human-driven decline of life on Earth points to the need for transformative change](#). *Science*, 366, (6471), eaax3100. DOI: 10.1126/science.aax3100.

⁷ Maryland Department of Natural Resources (2015). [Maryland State Wildlife Action Plan 2015-2025](#), chapter 5.