

Thursday March 4, 2021

TO: Paul Pinsky, Chair of Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee and Committee Members

FROM: Caitlin Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation & Climate Policy Analyst

POSITION: Favorable with Amendment SB 925 Workgroup on Public Water Access

The Nature Conservancy (the Conservancy) supports, with an amendment, SB 925 offered by Senator Elfreth. SB 925 seeks to reverse existing inequities in public water access across Maryland through establishing a diverse and inclusive workgroup to study and recommend methods to increase public water access and ensure equitable opportunities to receive the benefits that public water access provides.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the impacts that lack of access to green spaces has in our communities. Green spaces are essential to physical and mental health, especially at a time when indoor public spaces can pose health risks, particularly to immunocompromised individuals. Public water access locations provide invaluable opportunities for recreation, socialization, and education; our waterways are some of our state's most treasured assets. Increasing our waterways' and natural resources' prevalence and accessibility also promotes environmental stewardship by instilling a greater sense of public responsibility for preserving these natural assets.

We know that intense collaboration between frontline communities, governments, large and small non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private financing is essential to achieve the transformational change that is necessary to create equitable access to natural resources, green spaces, and all of the benefits that those assets provide. Water is intrinsically tied to culture, livelihoods, food, wildlife habitat, and survival. Every community has a stake in water access and many communities have been historically excluded from these conversations. That is why we would recommend an amendment to this legislation to include in the workgroup one representative of the Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs designated by the Chair of the Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs. This would allow Maryland's indigenous communities to also have a seat at the table and allow the workgroup insight into the educational, social, and economic needs of indigenous people when studying and making recommendations about public water access.

The Conservancy commends Senator Elfreth for working to reverse existing inequities in public water access in our state and strongly encourages the Committee to consider an amendment to include indigenous representation on the workgroup, which would strengthen the intent of the bill to create a diverse and inclusive conversation.

Therefore, we urge a favorable with amendment report on SB 925.