

Wednesday, March 1, 2023

TO: Kumar Barve, Chair of House Environment & Transportation Committee; and Committee Members

FROM: Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations; and Caitlin Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation & Climate Policy Analyst

POSITION: Support HB 289 Maryland Forestry Education Fund - Establishment

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports HB 289 offered by Delegate Stein. This bill would establish the Maryland Forestry Education Fund as a permanent fund to enhance and expand the Maryland Forestry Foundation's education programs for forest landowners.

TNC is a global conservation organization working to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Maryland, our work focuses on delivering science-based, on-the-ground solutions that secure clean water and healthy living environments for our communities, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing resilience in the face of a changing climate. We are dedicated to a future where people and nature thrive together.

TNC and the American Forest Foundation jointly developed the Family Forest Carbon Program, which enables family forest owners to access carbon markets, empowering them to help address climate change while earning income from their land. This program has resulted in verifiable carbon reductions, economic benefits for rural areas, increased private investment in forests, and improved habitat and forest resiliency. We educate and support private and family landowners to advance forest stewardship while generating economic gains. We understand how beneficial and cost-effective a program similar to the Maryland Forestry Education Fund can be for our state.

The ongoing funding established in HB 289 would dedicate additional financial support for a variety of sustainable forestry activities for forestry boards in Maryland, along with providing additional educational resources for local governments and landowners to support forest conservation. There are nearly 150,000 private and family forest owners in Maryland, amounting to 1.2 million acres of forested lands. These forests supply massive clean air and water benefits, provide habitat to a variety of species, are vital for climate resilience and are critical to Maryland communities' health and to the state's economy. In order to better manage these resources across the state, HB 289 will expand forest landowner training programs' scope to incorporate the latest information on sustainable forestry practices, ecosystem services, climate science, conservation, and more. By providing consistent learning opportunities for private land owners, district forestry boards and local governments, this learning can be integrated into state forest management plans. Improving forestry stewardship on privately owned lands is vital for maintaining biodiversity in Maryland and leading to more resilient forests across our state.

The Nature Conservancy commends Delegate Stein for investing in forest stewardship and education for private forest landowners across the state to support forest resilience and biodiversity for years to come.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on HB 298.