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Committee: Education, Energy, and Environment

Testimony on: SB915 “Biodiversity and Agriculture Protection Act”

Position: Favorable

Hearing Date: March 5, 2024

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club urges a favorable report on SB915, which will improve the process to prohibit the propagation, purchase, and sale of invasive plants that are harming our state. Since Maryland passed its first law in 2011 to address invasive plants, only six of nearly 300 (2%) invasive plants tracked by the Maryland Invasive Species Council have been prohibited. This bill will also address invasive aquatic species, which are increasingly harming our waterways.

While native plants are always the best choice to protect Maryland’s wildlife and plants, relatively few non-natives (6% globally)¹ become invasive. However, for the plants that do become invasive, their impact is frequently devastating to our biodiversity and costly to agriculture, property owners, and local governments. Invasive non-native species “have contributed solely or alongside other drivers of change to 60 percent of recorded global animal and plant extinction.”² Further, due to increased global trade, human travel, and climate change, the spread of invasive plants is accelerating.

These plants frequently crowd out native plants, on which our native wildlife depends. Some vines like kudzu, porcelain berry, wisteria, Japanese honeysuckle, English ivy, and Oriental bittersweet can completely cover all that comes in their path.³ Over time, they girdle and weigh down healthy trees, eventually killing them. These vines absorb water, sunlight, and soil nutrients that native plants previously utilized.

Some invasive plants, like barberry and Japanese stiltgrass, put toxins into the soil and change the soil pH, which kills native plant species. When these invasive plants crowd out native plants, the wildlife that depends on these plants becomes threatened. Maryland wildlife has co-evolved with our native plants over millennia. Most do not adapt when their food and habitat is eradicated within a few decades.

A growing challenge is invasive aquatic plants, which are not controlled with existing legislation. As noted by University of Maryland experts: “Hydrilla is an aquatic plant that alters ecosystem structure by establishing dense surface mats that shade out the native vegetation below. The mats are so dense that they impede water flow, resulting in zones of low oxygen and accompanying fish kills. Surface areas of stagnant water provide ideal habitat for mosquito larvae. Hydrilla hosts bacteria that poison aquatic birds that consume it. This poison can move up

¹ Roy, Helen et al., Thematic Assessment Report on Invasive Alien Species and their Control of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), December 11, 2023

² Ibid

³ University of Maryland Extension, <https://extension.umd.edu/resource/introduction-invasive-plants-maryland/>

the food chain, as documented when some bald eagles in Georgia ate poisoned water birds and died.”⁴ Hydrilla also impedes boat traffic and fishing, thus impacting recreation and commerce.

While the loss of species is incalculable, there are concrete costs that impact all Marylanders.

Maryland’s DNR is estimated to have spent roughly \$1 million to manage hydrilla in Deep Creek Lake since 2014. That’s just managing one species at one location. Our national, state and local parkland is also filled with invasive species. In nearby Shenandoah National Park, for example, 28% of the park is infested with invasive plants. By one estimate, it would take \$27M to get the invasive plants under control with ongoing costs to maintain; however, nearly the entire park budget of \$20M is committed to running the park.⁵ Frequently park budgets do not provide sufficient funds to control or eradicate these species. Recognizing the invaders more quickly and prohibiting their sale earlier follows the adage “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

Home and commercial property owners also regularly labor and spend significant sums for landscapers to treat their properties to reduce or eradicate invasive species. Trees lost to invasive vines cost thousands to remove, reduce property values, and exacerbate summer heat.

Agricultural yields are reduced by 12% due to invasive plants⁶ despite the \$6 billion spent annually on pesticides, which are harmful to workers and to the environment. Reduced yields and increasing pesticides drive up food and healthcare costs. Our existing noxious weed ordinances address some of these harmful plants, but many others are not addressed. Over three-fourths of crop weeds are invasive and 95% of corn and soybeans are grown with herbicides.^{7 8}

While most invasive plants were introduced through nurseries, a study by Mt. Cuba Center found only 4% of the plants sold in Mid-Atlantic nurseries are invasive.⁹ They are a small segment of business for most Maryland nurseries, but a major cost for farmers, property owners, and government. More quickly prohibiting the invasive plants that are causing harm and addressing invasive aquatic plants will ultimately save everyone a lot of money down the road.

We respectfully request a favorable report on SB915.

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⁴ Ibid

⁵ Milbank, Dana. How I learned to love toxic chemicals, *Washington Post*, June 30, 2023,

⁶ Pimentel, David, Lori Lach, Rodolfo Zuniga, Doug Morrison, Environmental and Economic Costs of Nonindigenous Species in the United States, *BioScience*, Volume 50, Issue 1, January 2000, p. 58

⁷ Ibid

⁸ ERS.USDA.GOV, Charts of Note, May 2, 2016.

⁹ Coombs, George, Denise Gilchrist and Patricia Watson, An assessment of the native and invasive horticultural plants sold in the mid-Atlantic region, *Native Plants Journal*, March 2020