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March 22, 2024

To: Chair Korman, Vice-Chair Boyce and members of the Maryland House Committee on Environment and Transportation

From: Jim Brown, Policy Director, Audubon Mid-Atlantic

Subject: Favorable Testimony for Maryland Senate Bill 969 – The Whole Watershed Act

Audubon Mid-Atlantic submits this testimony in support of Senate Bill 969. Audubon Mid-Atlantic is the regional office of National Audubon Society, representing over 35,000 Marylanders who advocate for the protection of birds, bird habitat, and policies aiming to protect both birds and human communities in the face of increasing environmental challenges, habitat loss, pollution, and climate change. We use science and community building to work with partner organizations, government agencies, and local communities to protect birds and the places they need to survive now, and into the future. SB 969 will bring increased resources and new innovative approaches to how Maryland protects and enhances the watersheds which both our bird and human communities rely on.

One of SB 969's proposed strategies, refocusing on shallow water and shallow water habitats will bring significant attention and collaboration to restoring Maryland's iconic tidal marshes in the Chesapeake and sand islands in the coastal bays. Audubon is on the ground helping to plan large scale restoration efforts in these places. The barriers to funding and permitting, along with the traditionally small scale of restoration efforts is not allowing conservation work to keep pace with the urgency of the threats our tidal areas face with climate change, pollution, and water quality degradation. We can attest to the need for innovation and increased collaboration as outlined in SB 969 to support this work.

Birds tell us there is a need for innovative and new strategies to focus resources on entire watersheds, rather than piecemeal approaches of the past. The time is now to use these approaches in the five pilot watersheds as outlined in SB 969. From our Atlantic shoreline and Chesapeake Bay marshes to our urban parks and western Maryland mountains, birds in Maryland are under threat. Maryland is made up of interconnected watersheds which provide critical habitat to migrating and resident bird species. Audubon works in watersheds across the state in collaboration with local communities, state and federal agencies, and partner organizations. Our watershed conservation work ranges from protecting upland forests to planning and implementing saltmarsh and island restoration projects on the lower Chesapeake Bay and in our Atlantic Coastal Bays. The methods outlined in SB 969 will give the state, local communities, and conservation practitioners the ability to look at the big picture of watershed health and target appropriate solutions with better outcomes for the Chesapeake Bay and other watersheds throughout the state.

These special places not only provide vital habitat for iconic Maryland birds, but they also filter water, provide marsh grasses which remove carbon from the atmosphere, and buffer vulnerable towns from storm surges and rising sea levels. Investing in our shared watersheds, especially tidal and coastal zones has co-benefits that will protect Maryland's special ecosystems, economies, and watersheds. SB 969 will help us think big and improve access to restoration resources, increase agency collaboration, and focus on our important watersheds to improve the health of our shared ecosystems.

Science tells us birds are in decline due to habitat loss and climate change. 1/3 of all Maryland bird species experienced significant population declines in the past 50 years. Through improved monitoring and a new suite of conservation tools SB 969 will enable Maryland to stay ahead of this trend and bend the bird curve back by tailoring restoration and conservation practices in our watersheds to improve the health of whole ecosystems, rather than small sections of a stream or river. It will continue to hold Maryland up as a leader in ecosystem preservation, climate action, water quality, and the protection of birds now and in the future.

Audubon Mid-Atlantic respectfully urges a favorable review of this legislation.

Thank You,

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