



Date: February 21, 2024

Bill: HB 729 – Vernal Pool Wetlands Protection Act of 2024

Position: Support

Dear Chair Korman and Members of the Committee:

The National Aquarium respectfully requests a favorable report for **House Bill 729 – Department of the Environment – Nontidal Wetlands – Protection of Vernal Pools, also known as the Vernal Pool Wetlands Protection Act of 2024**. The legislation would define vernal pools as seasonal wetlands; and require the Department of the Environment to develop a plan to identify vernal pools throughout the state and establish protections related to their preservation.

Vernal pools are isolated seasonal bodies of water that form during the wetter months of each year and play a key role in the health of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. For one, they serve as necessary habitats that support an incredible variety of life. Biologists have identified more than 700 species that depend on vernal pools as habitat in northeastern region of the US – including wood frogs, American toads, spotted salamanders, Eastern fairy shrimp and the state-endangered tiger salamanders. The still water and fallen leaves along with an abundance of invertebrate prey and an absence of fish predators make vernal pools ideal breeding grounds for these and other amphibians.

Vernal pools are also an important part of our hydrological system, serving as natural stormwater runoff ponds that capture and filter stormwater and replenish groundwater. Nature provides these important ecosystem services for free, and particularly during challenging budget realities, it would behoove us to identify and conserve seasonal wetlands that help supply people with clean water.

One of the National Aquarium’s overarching conservation goals is to save wildlife and habitats, and we recognize that the ephemeral features that make vernal pools important ecosystems are the same reasons they are vulnerable to human disturbance. They do not qualify for current wetland regulations in Maryland, and following a 2023 U.S. Supreme Court decision, vernal pools and other seasonal wetlands effectively lost Clean Water Act protections.

With this bill, Maryland has an opportunity to both improve wetland science and protect vernal pools. **We urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on HB 729.**

Contact:

Ryan Fredriksson
Vice President, Government Affairs
410-385-8276
rfredriksson@aqua.org

Maggie Ost Dahl
Sr. Conservation Policy Manager
410-385-8275
mostdahl@aqua.org