

Wednesday, February 21, 2024

TO: Marc Korman, Chair of the House Environment and Transportation Committee, and Committee Members
FROM: Humna Sharif, The Nature Conservancy, Climate Adaptation Manager; Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations
POSITION: Support HB 729 Department of the Environment - Nontidal Wetlands - Protection of Vernal Pools (Vernal Pool Wetlands Protection Act of 2024)

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports HB 729 offered by Delegate Hill. HB 729 mandates the Department of the Environment (MDE) to create regulations aimed at protecting and preserving vernal pools in Maryland. Vernal pools are seasonal wetlands that host unique ecosystems and contribute significantly to the state's biodiversity. This legislation would require MDE to develop a plan for identifying vernal pools in the state, including their number and location. HB 729 establishes protections for vernal pools and defines them as non-tidal wetlands supporting at least one amphibian species.

Vernal pools nurture rare and unique species in Maryland that rely solely on these ephemeral habitats for their survival. These habitats are sanctuaries for wood frogs, eastern spadefoot frogs, mole salamanders, fairy shrimp and many other species in Maryland. Species like the fairy shrimp and other invertebrates use vernal pools for their entire life cycle. Many species that rely on vernal pools for breeding are listed as rare, threatened, or endangered, for example, the eastern tiger salamander. The loss of vernal pools and the critical terrestrial habitat around them can lead to local amphibian species loss, a decrease in biodiversity, and a decline in food available for many other animals that live in proximity.

Vernal pools can often be an overlooked habitat because of their small size and temporal nature. Currently in Maryland, vernal pools are not legally defined as wetlands and HB 729 aims to update this status. Legislatively defining vernal pools will allow MDE to analyze, study and collect important data for these pockets of biodiversity and give the agency the necessary tools to prioritize their long-term health. With increased pressures from development, urbanization, and climate change, these delicate ecosystems are facing unprecedented threats requiring urgent action from state regulatory bodies for their protection.

TNC is part of a global effort to preserve the world's remaining wild and near-natural habitats, with the goal of protecting 30 percent of the planet by 2030. Each year, the United States loses an area the size of Delaware to development and unsustainable use. This land and biodiversity loss can often be irreversible. Here in Maryland, the lands and waters that surround us are irreplaceable resources. They are an invaluable part of our heritage, our economy, and our identity. Climate change and a wide range of human activities are impacting habitats at an unprecedented and unsustainable rate. The precipitous decline in biodiversity is one of our greatest challenges; it is jeopardizing food and water supplies and undermining global, social and economic stability. Economists have estimated that nature contributes trillions of dollars to the global economy each year, in the form of ecosystem services such as pollination and water filtration and storage.

By creating a protection framework for vernal pools, Maryland can take marked steps to reverse biodiversity loss in our state in order to create a future where natural areas can support the most vulnerable species and can continue to provide valuable ecosystem services on which Marylanders depend.

We commend Delegate Hill for offering HB 729, which sets Maryland on a path towards long-term protection of vernal pools by defining them in law and creating regulations for identifying and protecting these ecosystems in our state.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on HB 729.