



WRITTEN TESTIMONY

BILL NO.: Senate Bill 699 – Forest Conservation Act – Linear Projects – Alteration

COMMITTEE: Economic Matters and Environment and Transportation

HEARING DATE: February 25, 2025

SPONSOR: Senator Ready

POSITION: Favorable

I respectfully submit this testimony in strong support of Senate Bill 699, which strengthens Maryland’s commitment to forest conservation by excluding new transmission and distribution lines from the definition of a “linear project” under the Forest Conservation Act. This legislation is critical for ensuring that electric utilities do not exploit regulatory loopholes to clear-cut forests and degrade Maryland’s rural landscapes under the guise of infrastructure expansion.

The Environmental and Economic Imperative for SB0699

Forests and Stream Buffers: Critical to Maryland’s Waterways and the Chesapeake Bay

Maryland’s forested lands and riparian buffers play an essential role in protecting water quality by filtering pollutants, stabilizing streambanks, and reducing sediment runoff into our waterways. According to environmental impact assessments of infrastructure projects like the Maryland Piedmont Reliability Project (MPRP), over **101 streams and water bodies** are at risk of increased erosion and contamination due to land clearing for new transmission lines.

The loss of **over 394 acres of forest** under projects like the MPRP would further strain an already stressed Chesapeake Bay watershed, increasing sedimentation, harming aquatic life, and exacerbating flooding concerns. The mitigation of these environmental impacts is neither guaranteed nor immediate—once forests are cut, ecosystems take decades to recover. SB0699 provides essential protections to prevent unnecessary deforestation and to safeguard Maryland’s water quality for generations to come.



The Devastating Impact of Infrastructure Expansion on Rural Maryland

The construction of 303 access roads for MPRP—each between 16 and 25 feet wide—would lead to **140 acres of permanent land destruction**, fragmenting ecosystems and paving over prime farmland. Such land loss disrupts the delicate balance of rural life, threatening both the economic viability of farms and the scenic beauty that attracts residents and visitors to Maryland's countryside.

Rural Maryland is not just an area of natural beauty; it is a key driver of our state's economy. Agricultural lands support thousands of jobs and contribute to food security. However, soil erosion, runoff pollution, and habitat destruction caused by large-scale infrastructure projects degrade farmland, rendering it less productive and economically unsustainable in the long run.

Keeping Maryland Attractive: Strengthening the Tax Base Through Sustainable Development

One of Maryland's most significant economic advantages is its rural beauty. Residents choose to live in these areas for their open spaces, clean air, and connection to nature. However, the encroachment of industrial infrastructure, such as high-voltage transmission lines and associated deforestation, threatens property values, deters new homebuyers, and reduces the tax base.

The expansion of transmission infrastructure does not just impact those directly affected—it decreases the overall attractiveness of Maryland's rural areas, leading to slowed economic growth and decreased local tax revenues.

By passing SB0699, Maryland can take a firm stand in favor of responsible infrastructure planning—ensuring that conservation efforts align with economic growth while maintaining the rural charm that makes our state a desirable place to live, work, and invest.



Conclusion

Senate Bill 699 is a necessary safeguard against the unchecked destruction of Maryland's forests, farmlands, and waterways under the pretext of transmission infrastructure expansion. By amending the Forest Conservation Act to prevent transmission and distribution projects from bypassing conservation requirements, this bill upholds Maryland's commitment to sustainable development while protecting our natural resources and the economic vitality of our rural communities.

For these reasons, I strongly urge the committee to issue a **favorable report** on SB0699.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

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