

Written Testimony in Support of House Bill 613

House Environment and Transportation Committee

Dear Chair Korman, Vice Chair Guyton, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Ryan St. Laurent, and I am submitting this testimony in strong support of House Bill 613. I am an environmental professional with a degree in Environmental Sciences, with a concentration in natural resource management and economic policy. I have lived in Chesapeake Beach my entire life and have spent decades working, recreating, and observing conditions on our local waters and shorelines.

I began working with the Calvert Soil Conservation District in 2018, where I have designed and implemented conservation practices on agricultural lands, served as an erosion and sediment control specialist, and currently serve as Assistant District Manager. My current work focuses primarily on oyster restoration and nearshore ecological processes.

I support HB 613 because it represents a necessary, scientifically grounded refinement of Maryland's shoreline regulations—one that better accounts for the physical and geomorphic realities of shorelines in Calvert and St. Mary's County. In my professional experience, effective conservation policy must be adaptable to site-specific conditions and reflective of natural systems. When regulations prioritize uniformity over function, they can unintentionally produce poorer environmental outcomes.

As currently implemented by Maryland Department of the Environment, living shorelines are confined to intertidal marsh designs—generally consisting of minimal rock structures intended to support a narrow band of marsh vegetation between Mean Low Water and approximately 1.5 times the tidal range. However, intertidal marsh is not the natural shoreline condition along approximately 33 miles of Calvert County's mainstem shoreline. Instead, historically and presently, these shorelines are characterized by oyster reefs, submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV), beaches, and upland vegetation that rarely occupies the intertidal zone, based on more than 20 years of personal and professional observation and thorough research.

Much of the mainstem shoreline in Calvert County and parts of St. Mary's County is defined by narrow beaches, actively eroding coastal bluffs, limited sediment supply, and relatively high wave energy. Along riverine shorelines, steep upland slopes transition directly into steep nearshore bathymetry. In these settings, standard living shoreline designs that perform well elsewhere in Maryland are often not physically sustainable, cost-effective, or

ecologically appropriate. When such projects fail, they require repeated disturbance, emergency repairs, and continued permitting actions—outcomes that are neither environmentally protective nor economically responsible.

House Bill 613 does not weaken Maryland's commitment to natural shoreline protection. Rather, it strengthens that commitment by expanding the definition of living shorelines to include oyster reefs, SAV, and beach systems where those features represent the natural and functional shoreline condition. Allowing site-appropriate flexibility improves long-term shoreline stability, reduces repeated environmental disturbance, and better aligns regulatory intent with real-world ecological performance. Importantly, it also enhances Maryland's climate resiliency by prioritizing self-regenerative systems. Oyster reefs, for example, can accrete three or more inches annually—outpacing sea level rise—while often costing a fraction of traditional marsh-based shoreline protection projects.

I understand there is concern regarding the delegation of waiver authority and time-of-year (TOY) restrictions to the local Soil Conservation Districts. The intent of this legislation is not to remove environmental protections, but to apply them more precisely. For example, statewide TOY restrictions exist for tidal waters below 6 ppt salinity to protect shortnose sturgeon, yet there is no documented presence of this species in certain local waters such as the Patuxent River. Conversely, there are currently no TOY restrictions protecting horseshoe crab spawning activity on sandy beaches where they are well-documented and ecologically critical. HB 613 allows for this type of targeted, science-based refinement.

I am aware of concerns that delegating waiver authority to the local Soil Conservation Districts may exceed their technical capacity. Based on my professional experience, I believe the opposite is true. District staff routinely design, review, and oversee living shoreline projects and other conservation practices, and are fully qualified to evaluate site conditions, project feasibility, and environmental impacts. Importantly, Districts possess a level of local, field-based knowledge that cannot be replicated through centralized review. We observe these shorelines during storm events, high-energy conditions, and seasonal extremes—often on their worst days—providing insight into shoreline dynamics that is critical for sound decision-making.

In addition, Soil Conservation Districts are uniquely positioned to provide timely and efficient determinations. Unlike centralized agencies, District staff can conduct site visits, assess conditions firsthand, and make informed decisions quickly—often the same day a request is made. This combination of technical expertise, direct field access, and local knowledge allows Districts to apply waiver authority thoughtfully, conservatively, and with a clear understanding of real-world shoreline behavior. HB 613 leverages this existing capacity to improve regulatory outcomes without reducing environmental protection.

There has also been concern regarding reductions in mitigation requirements for certain shoreline components deemed “structural.” In practice, many of these features—such as beaches and oyster reefs—are entirely natural and historically foundational to our shoreline. Beaches require a toe feature to persist; historically, oyster reefs served that role. When oyster reefs trap sediment and allow a perched beach to form, wave energy is dissipated on sand rather than against eroding bluffs or infrastructure. These reefs raise nearshore elevations, reduce turbidity, and create conditions favorable for SAV growth. Together, oyster reefs, beaches, and SAV function as a highly effective, self-sustaining shoreline stabilization system.

While oyster reefs and beaches are categorized as structural, they are fully natural living shorelines and self-mitigating by design. Additional mitigation beyond existing federal requirements is unnecessary. The very name Chesapeake Bay derives from an Algonquian term meaning “Great Shellfish Bay.” Oyster reefs are foundational to the Chesapeake—physically, chemically, and biologically—and HB 613 appropriately recognizes their role in shoreline protection and ecosystem health.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 613.