



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

March 4, 2020

HOUSE BILL 1306

**Natural Resources - SAV Protection Zones and Hydraulic Clam  
Dredges (Aquatic Habitat Protection Act)**

Chair Barve, Vice Chair Stein, members of the Environment and Transportation Committee, thank you for this opportunity to present HB1306, Natural Resources - SAV Protection Zones and Hydraulic Clam Dredges, the Aquatic Habitat Protection Act.

SAV, Submerged Aquatic Vegetation, also known as bay grasses, are very important to the overall health of the Chesapeake Bay and need to be protected. As part of the Chesapeake Bay Agreement of 2014, Maryland pledged to increase SAV beds to 130,000 acres by 2025. Gradual progress has been made and there are about 108,000 acres of SAV now in the Bay. However, the current system used by the Department of Natural Resources to map SAV is not sufficient to meet this goal, or protect these beds, and can be difficult for watermen to use.

In order to harvest soft shell clams and razor clams, hydraulic dredges are generally used. These dredges dig about 2 feet deep into the mud where clams have buried themselves, causing the water to become extremely cloudy and sending out silt plumes. Consequently, if the dredge goes through a grass bed, the plants can be uprooted and the dredge can become clogged. So, watermen do their best not to enter any grass beds.

HB1306 would help protect bay grasses by requiring DNR to make reasonable changes to their current system, including more frequent updates to SAV Protection Zones, and the implementation of a 150-foot buffer to encourage new growth and protect the grasses from machinery. Watermen are already required to maintain a 150 foot buffer between oyster beds and sanctuaries when using a hydraulic dredge.

This bill would not fundamentally change the technical methods used by DNR to map SAV Protection Zones. Grass beds are already mapped annually by the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS). DNR simply has to codify the data that is already available to them.

The annual updates are important in order to provide watermen with the latest available data, so they are better able to avoid those areas. This will help identify existing zones that no longer qualify for protection, opening these areas to clamming. HB1306 requires DNR to provide online maps of SAV, giving watermen access to an easy-to-use visual format, rather than the current system of listed coordinates.

HB1306 will assist Maryland in reaching this habitat goal by strengthening SAV Protection Zones, taking us one step closer to saving the Chesapeake Bay. At the request of the Department of Natural Resources, we have an amendment to remove the study required by this bill. We are also working on additional friendly amendments through further discussions with both DNR and the watermen, including requiring the Department to mark all zones with buoys.

I urge a favorable report on HB1306 with these amendments.