HB 1312 - Water Pollution Control - Discharge Permits - Industrial Poultry Operations
Environment and Transportation
March 4, 2020
Position: Favorable

Chairman Barve and Members of the Committee:

The Chesapeake Bay is a defining feature of our state, as well as a national treasure. It's our nation's most diverse estuary, with more than 3,600 species finding their home there, and gives opportunities for Marylanders to swim, boat, fish, and hike along its shores.

But the growth of factory farms and the subsequent pollution coming from them threatens our Bay. Last year, the dead zone in the Chesapeake Bay was the largest it's ever been, reaching a maximum size of 3.1 cubic miles in width[1]. Excess nutrient runoff from human activities has exacerbated this problem immensely, especially with factory farms pumping nitrogen and phosphorus-laden fertilizer onto their farm ground. Nitrogen and phosphorus runoff from industrial poultry farms on the Eastern Shore are leading to massive algal blooms in the Bay, reducing the amount of available oxygen and forming dead zones that kill huge amounts of fish, crabs, oysters, and other wildlife.[2] Nutrient pollution like this can destroy natural ecosystems as we know it, and the Bay won't be an exception.

Stopping the growth of the Bay's dead zones and the frequency of its algal blooms is a multi-faceted journey, but one ultimately boils down to massively reducing nutrient runoff into the Bay. With towns, developers, power plants, and sewage treatment plants already doing their part to reduce their pollution levels, we need to make sure that massive factory farms are held accountable, too.

The reality is that there is simply too much chicken manure being produced with no environmentally sound option for disposal. Around 224,000 acres of farmlands that have been tested in Maryland are far saturated with phosphorus fertilizer.[3] Data has shown that Eastern Shore poultry houses are continuing to produce far more manure than Maryland agricultural

[1] https://www.chesapeakebay.net/state/dead_zone
[2] https://www.chesapeakebay.net/discover/bay-101
[3] https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/environment/bal-gr-excessive-phosphorus-levels-measured-on-18-percent-of-md-farmland-20160314-story.html

land needs - estimates show that around 387,000 tons of chicken litter is produced annually.[4] Since farmers and their soil don't need this extra fertilizer, the soil does not absorb the nutrients and the chicken manure is carried off by rain into nearby creeks and streams that lead to the Bay. Over 200,000 acres of farmland tested in Maryland had phosphorous rates above the allowed limit, which means that over 200,000 acres of farmland in Maryland are contributing to this extreme nutrient pollution.

There are currently 305 million chickens on the Eastern Shore of Maryland[5]. Last year alone, chicken factory farms saw a 9% increase in the number of chicken houses that can hold up to 150 million chickens.[6] The poultry industry as a whole grew from 12% over the course of 2016.[7] The more this industry continues to grow, the more manure will be overproduced, and the more our Bay will suffer.

This is why Environment Maryland is supporting a moratorium on permits for new poultry farms, as well as the expansion of existing factory farms. Maryland has been trying for years to curb agricultural nutrient runoff, but without success. A moratorium is an immediate and effective first step in fighting for the health of the Chesapeake Bay.

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[4] https://www.wypr.org/post/booming-chicken-industry-sparking-new-regulations
[5] Ibid
[6] https://www.dpichicken.org/facts/facts-figures.cfm
[7] https://www.baltimoresun.com/business/bs-md-maryland-chicken-production-20180508-story.html