

Committee: Education, Health & Environmental Affairs
Testimony on: HB991: “Natural Resources--Forest Mitigation Banks--Qualified Preservation”
Organization: Montgomery Countryside Alliance
Person Submitting: Joyce Bailey, Climate Change Liaison
Position: Unfavorable
Hearing Date: March 31, 2021

Dear Mr. Chairman and Committee Members,

Montgomery Countryside Alliance strongly opposes HB 991. The Forest Conservation Act (FCA) has significant fundamental problems and loopholes that allow nearly a dozen acres of forests to be lost every day in the state. This bill further undercuts the FCA by protecting fewer forests, and leads to faster loss of forests. Additionally, this legislation would reverse the recent opinion of the Attorney General (AG) that clarified the parameters for how counties use forest mitigation banks. In effect, this bill would save only half (or fewer) of the forests that were being preserved last year. It also undercuts one of the major benefits of the Climate Solutions Now bill which requires the planting of 5 million trees.

The amount of mitigation required by the FCA already results in forest loss. In many planning zones, two-thirds of a fully forested parcel can be cleared before onsite or offsite mitigation is required. In the rare case where mitigation is required, only one acre of mitigation is needed for every four acres taken down. The current mitigation requirements in Maryland result in forest loss, and HB 991 would result in more loss.

Maryland needs as many forests as possible, a fact recognized by this Committee when it passed the Climate Solutions Now bill requiring the planting of 5 million trees. Forests clean our air as they intercept harmful air particulates and absorb noxious gases, such as sulfur dioxide. Forests sequester carbon dioxide. Every acre of forest saved sequesters enough carbon dioxide to equal the annual emissions of over 50 cars. Forests create clean drinking water. A survey of 27 water suppliers found that for every 10% increase in forest cover upstream of water intakes, treatment and chemical costs decreased by approximately 20%. Forests improve human health. Views of nature reduce stress. Studies show that populations living near forested areas exhibit lower asthma, diabetes, and high blood pressure rates. We pay for forest loss in ecological and economic costs. In the past 45 years, the loss of forests in the Baltimore-Washington region caused a 19 percent increase in polluted runoff costing us over \$1 billion, according to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Meanwhile, Bay taxpayers spend billions on projects to filter polluted runoff, which forests do for free. As more landscapes turn into shopping centers, subdivisions, and parking lots, we are forced to construct expensive man-made projects that divert and filter polluted water running off the asphalt. Many local governments are financially burdened by this work.

For these reasons, we strongly urge an UNFAVORABLE report from this Committee on HB 991.