

January 22th, 2021

Written Testimony on SB0151
Maryland Amendment for Environmental Human Rights
Environment and Transportation Committee

Position: FAVORABLE

As a member of Sunrise Movement, a youth led organization supporting rapid action to fight climate change and redress historical injustices, I - and the local Baltimore hub of which I am a member, support SB0151, the Maryland Amendment for Environmental Human Rights.

The ecological devastation facing Maryland communities through the climate crisis and through poor industrial practices that cause it - is a burden we should not have to face. We have a right to clean water and air. I live in Baltimore and we should not have to worry about the pollutants from incinerators and industry causing respiratory health issues at some of the highest rates in the country - during a respiratory pandemic no less.

I have seen scores of folks testifying against pipelines in Charles County that would pollute their communities at the Public Service Commission and worsen climate impacts. Their voices were systematically ignored, simply because we do not value a healthy environment as a human right.

Voting favorably for the Maryland Amendment for Environmental Human Rights will give the right to live in a healthful environment to every Marylander across the generations: those alive today - especially the children - and all those yet to come. It will also create a solid legal basis to review and revise our existing environmental legislative authorities to better protect our environment, economy, and public health.

We currently rely heavily on the legislative process to get the job done. That is not enough. We need to recognize the right to a healthy environment in our Constitution to assure such protection. Years of not protecting this fundamental right through the existing legal authorities has left the door open for disparities in exposure to air and water pollution as well as increased rates of asthma, heart disease and cancer due to environmental pollution of our land and our bay. Six states already have environmental rights in their constitutions. More states are currently considering adding them.

The Environmental Rights Amendment would work in tandem with existing environmental policy and environmental legislation to assure that:

1. “Each person has the fundamental and inalienable right to live in a healthful environment”, including clean air, water, land and a stable climate; and
2. The State has the necessary legal authority and responsibility to serve as the trustee and protector of Maryland’s natural resources for current and future generations.

This is the time for this Amendment, particularly as we continue to struggle with the ongoing pandemic. The past year has underscored the tremendous dangers we face due to the increased exposure of all humankind to zoonotic illnesses (diseases transmitted from animals to humans). It has made clear that our increased use of natural resources and global mobility have put us in ever closer contact with animals and other organisms that humans had little prior exposure to. Because of Maryland's geography, reliance on maritime commerce, and high levels of mobility and urbanization, all Marylanders are uniquely at risk. This pandemic and the risk of others that may yet come, has also underscored the tremendous living and healthcare inequities that have existed in our state for generations. Those circumstances demand that we take a close look at our legal system and put a stronger foundation in place, one that addresses the inequities we all know exist and protects everyone’s right to live in a healthy environment.

We urge a FAVORABLE report for this crucial Amendment.