

**Wednesday, March 9, 2022**

**TO:** Senator Guy Guzzone, Chair of Budget and Taxation Committee; and Senator Paul Pinsky, Chair of Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee and Committee Members

**FROM:** Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations; and Cait Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, Climate and Conservation Policy Analyst

**POSITION:** Support SB 791 - Land Conservation - Establishment of Goals and Programs (Maryland the Beautiful Act)

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports SB 791 offered by Senator Elfreth. TNC is a global conservation organization working to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Maryland, our work focuses on delivering science-based, on-the-ground solutions that secure clean water and healthy living environments for our communities, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing resilience in the face of a changing climate. We are dedicated to a future where people and nature thrive together.

TNC is part of a global effort to preserve the world's remaining wild and near-natural habitats, with the goal of protecting 30 percent of the planet by 2030. SB 791 sets state-wide land conservation goals for Maryland, aiming to protect 30% of lands by 2030 and 40% of lands by 2040. These goals will ensure that open space will be accessible and available for current and future generations of Marylanders. This bill also prioritizes equity through a new Greenspace Equity grant program. This grant program invests in land acquisition, stewardship and park development projects in geographies across the state that currently lack access to green spaces. This grant program will be community-led, ensuring projects funded are developed to best meet the needs of each community.

There are nearly 150,000 private and family forest owners in Maryland, amounting to 1.2 million acres of forested lands. These forests supply massive clean air and water benefits, provide habitat to a variety of species and are critical to the health of Maryland communities and the state's economy. TNC recognizes these lands' value and we are working in partnership with the American Forest Foundation to pilot the Family Forest Carbon Program. This program allows small family landowners to access carbon markets and provide financial incentives to implement conservation practices that sequester carbon and protect clean water. We are glad to see that SB 791 also values these lands through establishing additional investments in the Mel Noland Woodland Incentives Fund. As outlined in the bill, these funds are used to support stewardship on these privately owned lands, which are vital for maintaining biodiversity in Maryland. This bill will also create funding mechanisms for private land trusts to better compete in real estate markets. TNC uses a similar process as an organization - the Land Protection Fund - to prioritize and fund land acquisitions across our North America program. Creating a Revolving Loan Fund through SB 791 would enable private land trusts, that may not be able to purchase lands without financial assistance, to make large land acquisitions in Maryland; therefore, it will preserve lands that will benefit people and nature for years to come.

Each year, the United States loses an area the size of Delaware to development and unsustainable use. This land and biodiversity loss can often be irreversible. Here in Maryland, the lands and waters that surround us are

precious resources. They are an invaluable part of our heritage, our economy, and our identity. Climate change and a wide range of human activities are impacting habitats at an unprecedented and unsustainable rate. The precipitous decline in biodiversity is one of our greatest challenges; it is jeopardizing food and water supplies and undermining global, social and economic stability. Economists have estimated that nature contributes trillions of dollars to the global economy each year, in the form of ecosystem services such as pollination and water filtration and storage. By passing the Maryland the Beautiful Act, we can take marked steps to reverse biodiversity loss in our state in order to create a future where natural places can support the most vulnerable species and can continue to provide valuable ecosystem services on which state residents depend.

TNC commends Senator Elfreth for advancing legislation aimed at protecting habitats to maintain Maryland's biodiversity and preserving treasured ecosystem services as well as nature's intrinsic cultural and physical values.

**Therefore, we urge a favorable report on SB 791.**