

**Wednesday, March 30, 2022**

**TO:** Paul Pinsky, Chair of the Senate 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, Conservation & Climate Policy Analyst

**POSITION:** Support with Amendments HB 884 State Conservation Land - Old-Growth Forests – Management

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports HB 884, offered by Delegate Gilchrist, with amendments. 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. HB 884 would advance these goals by protecting areas of old-growth forest in Maryland State Parks and Wildlife Management Areas from logging practices. TNC also supports an amendment that would extend those protections to Natural Resource Management Areas. Natural Resource Management Areas were included in this bill as first introduced and were mistakenly removed during the House amendment process by an administrative error. The House amendments intended to remove land that could consist of private property, as well as land that already has some old-growth forest protections in place; Natural Resource Management Areas do not fall into those categories.

A 2007 study funded by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources found that there were nearly 2,300 acres of old-growth forest in 40 separate forested areas across the state. More than 1,700 acres were found within Maryland State Forests where logging is prohibited, either by a Wildland designation or through compliance with the Forest Stewardship Council, protecting these parcels. Maryland State Parks and Wildlife Management Areas do not provide the same protections, meaning that 17 out of the 40 old-growth areas, equaling approximately 400 acres, are not protected from logging. HB 884 would address this by requiring old-growth forests owned by the State to follow management practices that prohibit logging, thereby protecting existing old-growth forests and any future old-growth forests the state may acquire.

Old-growth forests host more biodiversity, and are able to store more carbon, than young forests. In the United States, 34% of forests are older than 140 years old, but only 2% of these forests are located outside of Alaska. Forests over 140 years old have declined by 30% globally since 1900. Because old-growth forests are rare and in decline due to natural and human-caused threats such as invasive species, disease, storms, land conversion, and climate change, it is more important than ever to formalize protections for this precious resource.

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. 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 social and economic stability. Old-growth forests are crucial to protecting state forests' biodiversity. By passing HR 884, Maryland can take marked steps to maintain old-growth forests' biodiversity within our state in order to create a future

where natural areas can support the most vulnerable species and can continue to provide valuable ecosystem services.

TNC commends Delegate Gilchrist for advancing legislation that preserves Maryland's old-growth forest habitats, protects biodiversity, and maintains our carbon storage capacity.

**Therefore, we urge a favorable with amendments report on HB 884.**