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Wednesday, March 16, 2022

TO: 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, Conservation & Climate Policy Analyst
POSITION: Support SB 945 Wetlands and Waterways Program - Authorizations for Ecological Restoration Projects

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports SB 945 offered by Senator Gallion. In Maryland, TNC's work focuses on delivering science-based, on-the-ground solutions that secure clean water and healthy living environments for our communities as well as increasing natural and community resilience in the face of a changing climate. We are dedicated to a future where people and nature thrive together.

In recent years, TNC has partnered with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the France-Merrick Foundation, and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to undertake one of the largest ecological restoration efforts in Maryland's history: the Pocomoke River Project. The Pocomoke floodplain restoration project's scale is massive; it encompasses roughly 4,000 acres of floodplain along 9-miles of the river. The project's goal is to restore the Pocomoke from historic ditching and channelization practices, which have caused increased flooding in downstream communities and increased nutrient and sediment runoff flowing into the Chesapeake Bay, contributing to dead zones.

During ditching and channeling, piles of dredged material along the river's edge created spoil banks that disconnected the river from the surrounding floodplains. The restoration project involved carving breaches into these spoil banks, testing methods for stabilizing breaches from erosion and planting native vegetation. TNC has also invested time into engaging landowners to help them identify a restoration plan that works for them, whether that is enrolling in a government program, placing an easement on their property, or entering into a private agreement with TNC. Working in collaboration with USGS and USDA scientists, we are also monitoring restoration benefits through placing devices that allow us to track flood reduction data as well as water quality improvements. The initial monitoring results show the floodplain reconnection project is providing the anticipated benefits. TNC has used what we've learned from this project to inform other ecosystem restoration work, including an eighty-acre wetland at Great Cypress Swamp in Delaware at the Pocomoke River's headwaters.

SB 945 seeks to establish a clear and intentional process for reviewing and evaluating applications for wetlands and waterways authorizations for ecological restoration projects. Currently, acquiring permits for restoration projects is a tedious process and requires extraneous justification for minor habitat impacts that are significantly benefiting other habitats. Separating gray infrastructure reviews from green infrastructure reviews will increase the feasibility of implementing restoration activities. These activities need to occur faster and more broadly given climate impacts' anticipated acceleration. The Pocomoke River Project provides evidence that ecological restoration mitigates climate impacts through building ecosystem resilience and improving water storage and filtration, which reduces downstream flooding in communities and improves water quality. With a more streamlined application process, TNC and our partners can accelerate these projects in order to deliver faster results across an even greater scale.

TNC commends Senator Gallion for sponsoring this legislation, which recognizes ecological restoration project's value and accelerates Maryland's process for implementing these projects in order to meet climate threats' growing urgency.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on SB 945.