

Tuesday, March 22, 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 HB 882 Pocomoke River Wildland – Alteration of Boundaries

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports HB 882. 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.

HB 882 seeks to expand and adjust the Pocomoke River Wildland's boundaries by increasing natural area protection and improving public access to this space. The proposed Wildlands expansion includes a current parcel of State Forest lands that, when added to the existing boundary, would expand this protected area by over 79 acres and extend the protected area along the Pocomoke River by 0.73 miles. This increase in protected area will significantly improve the Wildland area's ecological benefits.

In addition to increasing the Pocomoke River Wildland's size, the updated boundaries will also allow for creating a recreation trail through the Wildland that will increase public access. State Wildlands offer residents access to natural areas, with the opportunities for recreation such as hiking, hunting, fishing, bird watching and horseback riding, as well as opportunities for education and environmental stewardship. Currently, access to these areas, especially when compared to state Parks and recreation areas, can be a major hurdle for citizens to actually use state Wildlands. The new recreation trail in the Pocomoke River Wildland will connect the protected land with the town of Snow Hill and provide access for many residents and visitors to enjoy old forest and wetlands previously not accessible to the public. The proposed trail and increased accessibility would dramatically improve and enhance public understanding of Wildlands' ecological significance. By allowing for mixed uses, such as hiking and biking, this expansion will also enhance outdoor tourism opportunities in Worcester County.

HB 882 will expand the Pocomoke River Wildland's ecological benefits and increase public access, thereby better connecting Maryland residents and visitors to our natural areas.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on HB 882.