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Testimony in Support with amendments of
House Bill 727 - Natural Resources - Maryland Park Service and State Parks - Alterations (Great Maryland
Outdoors Act)
House Environment and Transportation
February 23, 2022

The Rural Maryland Council supports with amendments House Bill 727 - Natural Resources - Maryland Park Service and State Parks - Alterations (Great Maryland Outdoors Act). The Great Maryland Outdoors Act will benefit Maryland's agricultural and land preservation programs by ensuring additional resources for the preservation of additional land through programs such as the Rural Legacy Program, Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF), and the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO). This legislation will replace and accelerate the current repayment schedule for previous diversions of funds from Program Open Space.

Program Open Space has shown success in preserving Maryland's land. According to Forever Maryland, there are about 1.8 million acres of preserved land in Maryland. The DNR State Land Inventory makes up over a quarter of that land with just under 500,000 acres. MALPF is the second largest preserver, preserving about 340,000 acres or 19%. The additional funding will allow for the transition of farms to the next generation, increased recreational and economic opportunities in local communities, and the preservation of contiguous uninterrupted forestland. As the pandemic proved, our state and local parks are more popular and necessary than ever. The preservation of land also helps with the stewardship of the land by allowing better maintenance and care of the land. For example, being able to monitor and control the intrusion of invasive species or being able to manage storm waters. Controlling these factors that can harm the land keep it healthy and usable for the future.

Stateside and localside Program Open Space are also important economic drivers in Rural Maryland. Enhanced recreational opportunities will bring in additional visitors to Rural Maryland, impacting and enhancing local economies. According to *Economic Impact of Tourism in Maryland*, a report conducted by Tourism Economics, Maryland had 42.1 million visitors in 2019 who spent \$18.6 billion in the State and generated 2.6 billion in state and local taxes. We support efforts to enhance our community parks and playgrounds but ask that the \$60 million transfer of funds for State land acquisition under Program Open Space be reduced or eliminated.

There are equity issues across the State relating to state parks and available open spaces. Along with Baltimore City, both Wicomico and Kent County lack state park facilities. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources in partnership with the University of Maryland School of Public Health created the "MD Park Equity Mapper" to show the equity rates of access to public lands across the State. This was done by accounting for factors such as walkability, population, race, age, and distance to public park space. This map shows low equity in rural areas such as parts of western and southern Maryland and the State's eastern shore. While rural areas have less population and more land, this does not equate to land that is available or accessible for recreation or public use. Many Maryland residents that live near the State's waters, whether it is the Bay, a lake or river, also have no way of accessing the nearby waters. By preserving land and expanding parks across the State, these equity issues can be addressed, and all Marylanders can have access to public parks. The Rural Maryland Council respectfully requests your favorable with amendments support of HB 727.

The Rural Maryland Council (RMC) is an independent state agency governed by a nonpartisan, 40-member board that consists of inclusive representation from the federal, state, regional, county and municipal governments, as well as the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. We bring together federal, state, county and municipal government officials as well as representatives of the for-profit and nonprofit sectors to identify challenges unique to rural communities and to craft public policy, programmatic or regulatory solutions.

"A Collective Voice for Rural Maryland"