



CHESAPEAKE BAY FOUNDATION

*Environmental Protection and Restoration
Environmental Education*

House Bill 884

State Conservation Land - Old-Growth Forests - Protection

Date: February 25, 2022

Position: Support

To: Environment & Transportation Committee

From: Erik Fisher, AICP, Maryland Land Use Planner

Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF) **SUPPORTS** HB 884, which provides for sound management of old-growth forests on lands set aside for conservation. Old-growth forests provide unique and powerful environmental and social benefits, protecting biodiversity, fighting climate change, improving water quality, and improving human health.

Old-growth forests are unique ecosystems that keep Marylanders healthy and play a vital role in our region's environment.

While nearly all forested areas improve environmental conditions, the returns are often the greatest in old-growth forests – and some benefits can only be realized in these special areas. Old-growth forests sequester carbon at very high rates, create topsoil, provide microhabitats for fungi and fauna in accumulated dead wood, and provide a reservoir of diverse tree and understory species that can seed other areas. The mature trees and soil structure in old-growth forests also act as the Bay's best natural filter for polluted runoff, capturing nutrients and sediment that would otherwise foul nearby waterways.

Old-growth forests are rare and at risk of elimination without focused management.

The term “forest” is used to describe a continuum of wooded lands, from emergent natural regeneration of saplings to young pine stands, patches of maturing mixed hardwoods, and fully developed, multi-layered forest ecosystems. Existing state laws generally do not distinguish between these various types of forest. As a result, old-growth forests are usually managed as part of a much larger class of wooded lands governed by rules that allow for significant impact and loss. But according to the Old Growth Forest Network, less than 1% of our region's remaining forest land can be considered old-growth. As these areas are undefined and largely unprotected in statute, Maryland could lose its remaining old-growth forests and not even know it.

The management and protections afforded by HB 884 ensure a future for Maryland's old-growth forests.

HB 884 adopts a comprehensive definition of old-growth forests that is firmly rooted in science and practice. It applies this definition to lands that are already set aside for conservation, either owned by the state or where landowners have been compensated for preserving their land with an easement. Under HB 884, land managers can proactively address disease, invasive species, and activities that could irreparably harm the old-growth forest. It would also resolve conflicts that can arise between passive use and active development of public recreation lands by steering logging and development to more suitable areas.

CBF urges the Committee's FAVORABLE report on HB 884. For more information, please contact Robin Jessica Clark, Maryland Staff Attorney at rclark@cbf.org and 443.995.8753.

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