

Friday, February 18, 2022

TO: Kumar Barve, Chair of House Environment and Transportation Committee and Committee Members
FROM: Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relation; and Caitlin Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation & Climate Policy Analyst
POSITION: Support HB 706 Maryland Department of Emergency Management – Office of Resilience

The Nature Conservancy strongly supports HB 706 offered by Delegates Sample-Hughes and Watson. HB 706 seeks to establish an Office of Resilience and a Chief Resilience Officer position to direct the newly formed Office under the Maryland Department of Emergency Management (MDEM) with the intent of increasing the department's capacity to take a proactive approach to disaster mitigation and resilience. This new Office and position will be responsible for guiding resilience initiatives across Maryland by working closely with state agencies and local governments. This office will also be responsible for identifying and securing funding streams for these resilience efforts. At the federal level, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is improving funding streams for proactive pre-disaster mitigation. This new position would allow our state and local governments to capitalize on these significant changes at FEMA by taking advantage of new funding opportunities aimed at pre-disaster mitigation.

Establishing an Office of Resilience and appointing a Chief Resilience Officer will elevate Maryland among the ranks of the nation's resilience leaders, following the example set by nearly a dozen other states and many more major cities across the U.S. These state and local governments have used this capacity to establish networks for sharing information about how to maximize resilience by providing cohesive, strategic, and cross-jurisdictional leadership at the necessary scale. This legislation will allow Maryland to access the same benefits for our agencies, local governments, and vulnerable economic sectors.

We are already experiencing climate change impacts across Maryland, which will only increase in frequency and severity in the coming years. The most significant threats are due to increased sea level rise and erosion, changes in precipitation, including increased frequency of flash floods and storm surge, and increased temperatures. In many places, these issues compound each other. Parts of the state that were susceptible to flooding from past storms are now experiencing nuisance flooding on a far more regular basis, resulting in damaged infrastructure and disruption to emergency services. This legislation pursues a solution to this issue by pairing the new Office with the Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) to advance initiatives such as nature-based solutions in roadway upgrades, redesign, and removal projects that will reduce flooding and improve habitat health and connectivity.

Maryland has already observed one foot of sea level rise since the turn of the 20th century with an additional foot of rise expected by 2050. Localized land subsidence accelerates rates of erosion, thereby compounding the risks from sea level rise. By 2100, studies predict we may see up to three additional feet of sea level rise. The impacts are already being felt in communities across our state. Currently, over \$15 billion in property is directly in the path of projected rise. Cities like Annapolis have seen a doubling in coastal flood days over the past decade. The latest science tells us that flooding events could more than double in frequency in places like Baltimore as soon as 2035. On the Eastern Shore, Dorchester County is predicted to shrink from the 4th largest county by land area to the 14th by 2100, and saltwater intrusion is already damaging crop yields. Coastal

flooding currently threatens 81,000 Marylanders and, with predicted rise, an additional 38,000 will be in jeopardy by 2050. Sea level rise puts people, property, infrastructure, and critical natural resources at risk with staggering costs to our economy, livelihoods and our way of life. The Office of Resilience will work to address this by partnering with the Department of Housing and Community Development to assess development patterns in sea level rise hazard zones in order to inform planning and zoning decisions with reduced risk.

Increasing temperatures are also harming human health; in Baltimore City, temperatures reach up to 21°F hotter than in surrounding rural areas. By 2050, the city is estimated to experience five times as many dangerous heat days with a heat index over 105°F than at the start of the century. These impacts are not limited to cities; across Maryland, we average ten days a year when heat exceeds dangerous levels. This number is predicted to rise to forty days annually by 2050. Under this legislation, the new office will work with the Department of Housing and Community Development to ensure that communities most impacted by increasing heat have access to air conditioning. The legislation also prioritizes investing in frontline communities and promoting environmental justice in climate and hazard mitigation.

While reducing emissions is absolutely crucial to avoid the worst climate impacts, we know that our communities are already being harmed and, due to committed warming, will still face these growing challenges for years to come. Mitigation and adaptation must go hand in hand in order to best protect current and future generations from a daunting climate legacy. Increased capacity, resources, services, funding, leadership, and connectivity between federal and state agencies and local governments is necessary to address these growing threats and local needs.

Situating the new Office and position within MDEM will allow for improved responses, reduced risk, and a pathway for a more proactive and comprehensive approach to alleviating climate and natural disaster impacts. Many of the practices and solutions we need to implement require coordination across several agencies and local jurisdictional boundaries. Fortunately, the state already has a multitude of programs in place across many agencies that improve resilience; creating this position in MDEM will expand upon that work and investment by better incorporating emergency management perspectives within those projects and programs. This position will work directly with liaisons at state agencies to identify other programs and funding streams across multiple levels of government that can be paired to ensure more equitable access to resilience funding for many of Maryland's frontline, insufficiently resourced, and most threatened communities.

One example of this approach is funding opportunities through the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program. BRIC funds are awarded through competitive grants and aim to fund large, ambitious projects that address multiple issues. By creating the Office of Resilience in MDEM and appointing a Chief Resilience Officer, we will improve Maryland's ability to access these funds through capitalizing on existing communication and coordination pathways between MDEM and FEMA. Furthermore, in order to meet the flood risk assessment tools development goal, the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) will work with the Office of Resilience to update flood maps for current and projected precipitation levels. Using these updated maps and in conjunction with the latest scientific findings on sea level rise, state agencies, local governments, and the Office of Resilience can then work together to advance adaptation planning, including through designing corridors for marsh migration and strategizing for managed retreat in ways which protect habitat and wildlife functions as well as communities' needs. By working collaboratively and utilizing existing agency expertise, the Chief Resilience Officer will be able to direct investments to the areas of greatest need in Maryland.

Due to the overwhelming climate threats to our state, and the increasingly urgent need to move toward more proactive approaches for building resilience, TNC strongly supports creating an Office of Resilience and the Chief Resilience Officer position. Adding the lens of disaster risk reduction to our resilience building projects and programs will not only strengthen and protect our communities, but also lend itself to accessing increased

streams of federal funding. Greater capacity will allow state agencies to more readily identify and take advantage of opportunities for projects that meet their legislated mandates of promoting clean water and citizen health, while also improving Maryland's ability to adapt and persist in the face of a changing environment.

We commend Delegates Sample-Hughes and Watson on introducing this bill, which will strengthen Maryland's approach to disaster mitigation and climate change, protect public health and safety, and generate new capacity, networks, funding, and resources to build a more resilient Maryland.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on HB 706.