



Hearing before the
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
of the Maryland General Assembly
March 8, 2023

**Statement of Support (FAVORABLE)
of Maryland Catholics for Our Common Home on
SJ 4 - Environmental Human Rights**

Maryland Catholics for Our Common Home (MCCH) is a lay-led organization of Catholics from parishes in the three Catholic dioceses in Maryland: the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the Archdiocese of Washington, and the Diocese of Wilmington. It engages in education about, and advocacy based on, the teachings of the Catholic Church relating to care for creation. MCCH is a voice for the understanding of Catholic social teaching held by a wide array of Maryland Catholics—over 350 Maryland Catholics have already signed our statement of support for key environmental bills in this session of the General Assembly—but should be distinguished from the Maryland Catholic Conference, which represents the public policy interests of the bishops who lead these three dioceses.

MCCH wishes to express its enthusiastic support for passage of **Senate Joint Resolution 4-Environmental Human Rights**.

As Catholics, we believe that God’s creation and care for vulnerable groups in society as an integral part of our faith, as taught by recent Popes, including the forceful statements of Pope Francis in his 2015 encyclical, entitled *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*.^{*} Following in the footsteps of Saint John Paul II before him, Pope Francis preached in *Laudato Si’* of humanity’s need to undergo an “ecological conversion,” defined as a “transformation of hearts and minds toward greater love of God, each other, and creation...a process of acknowledging our contribution to the social and ecological crisis and acting in ways that nurture communion, healing and renewal of our common home.” That transformation requires us to “examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God’s creation through our actions and our failure to act” (no. 218).

Fifty years ago, Maryland lawmakers recognized that much harm had already been done, and thus legislators at that time committed the state and its agencies to a new guide for its environmental policies. The Maryland Environmental Policy Act of 1973 (MEPA) was a ground-breaking document. It was composed of two essential elements:

- (1) the assertion that “each person has a fundamental and inalienable right to a healthful environment,” and
- (2) a direction that all State agencies “identify, develop, and adopt methods and procedures” to implement that right.

^{*} The English text of the encyclical, to which the paragraph numbers in the following parentheses refer, can be found at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

The vision was that, going forward:

- (1) environmental amenities and values would be given appropriate consideration in planning and decision-making along with economic and technical considerations;
- (2) appropriate alternatives to existing policies, programs, procedures, and conflicts would be studied and considered; and
- (3) that the public would be involved, utilizing “the fullest practicable provision of timely public information and understanding.”

These were worthy goals, close in nature to the ecological conversion called for in *Laudato Si'*, and might have achieved great gains for Maryland, had the policy statement been crafted into commensurate laws and regulations.

On the 50th anniversary of the Maryland Environmental Policy Act (MEPA), MCCH joins with other faith-based organizations to say it is time to fix that. Senate Joint Resolution 4 asks the Maryland General Assembly to reinvigorate MEPA by reaffirming its principles and using them to guide its deliberations. It calls on the Administration to re-dedicate itself to further the development and implementation of environmental laws, practices, and policies called for by MEPA, for the benefit of current and future generations.

A fully implemented Maryland Environmental Policy Act would:

- create guidelines to help agencies craft and implement appropriate policies,
- promote meaningful processes for public information and participation,
- incorporate environmental justice definitions and processes in decision-making, and
- establish timely processes for keeping permits up to date.

Without a renewed commitment to MEPA’s salience and enforcement in caring for our common home, there will continue to be no unified, coherent foundation upon which our State’s agencies make their environmental policies, including ways to inform and engage the public, ways to assess environmental justice, and ways to ensure that laws are promulgated and implemented to reflect the central premise that every citizen “has a fundamental and inalienable right to a healthful environment.”

We encourage the Maryland General Assembly, along with our new Governor Moore and his administration, to strengthen our environmental policies and laws, better implement those already on the books, and embed protections for public health and environmental justice in all our agencies and decision-making.

Thank you for your consideration of our views and our respectful request for a **FAVORABLE** report on **Senate Joint Resolution 4-Environmental Human Rights**.