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**Testimony IN FAVOR of SB836
(MD Native Plant Program)
Presented to the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
of the Senate of Maryland
by Jane Henderson, Executive Director of Chesapeake Natives
March 2, 2023**

Chairman Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, members of the Committee,

I am here to offer Chesapeake Natives' strong support for SB836, creating a Maryland Native Plant Program. Chesapeake Natives is a volunteer-driven non-profit whose mission is to propagate, promote and protect native plants of the coastal plains and piedmont that form the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

The creation of a program that clearly identifies straight species of plants native to Maryland, as well as reliable sources to purchase those plants, will greatly help homeowners and landscapers alike make choices that are best for our plant and local ecosystem. Unfortunately, non-native species and cultivar plants are currently too often mislabeled and mislead consumers trying to do their best for biodiversity.

We know that biodiversity is essential to keeping our planet habitable for human beings. The complex, localized food webs that support life on earth are critically stressed as insect populations plummet. Without insects, most flowering plants and birds will go extinct as food webs collapse. As dire, the biosphere will rot without insects decomposing, leaving inhospitable bacteria and fungi to dominate.

Even with increasing calls for land in conservation, just over 85% of land east of the Mississippi is privately owned *so what we do in our yards matters*. By growing natives, planting natives and encouraging others to plant natives – particularly local ecotypes – we directly rebuild the food web, support biodiversity, while sequestering carbon and rebuilding natural habitat.

Audubon too has sounded the alarm: “Most of the landscaping plants available in nurseries are alien species from other countries . . . [that] not only sever the food web, but many have become invasive pests, outcompeting native species and degrading habitat in remaining natural areas.” *The solution: “homeowners, landscapers, and local policymakers can benefit birds and other wildlife by simply selecting native plants.”*¹

¹ See audubon.org/content/why-native-plants-matter

We are most excited about the Maryland Natives marketing program and signs and believe it will be a huge step to inform gardeners and plant consumers about native alternatives. And as a grower of native plants, we look forward to becoming certified as a Maryland Native Plant Grower and Retailer.

As a partner of the Department of Natural Resources in Rosaryville State Park, we have seen firsthand the Department's commitment and knowledge about Maryland natives and are pleased that they will play a role in the Maryland Native Plant Program.

For all these reasons we urge a favorable report on SB836. At the same time, we would like to respectfully *offer friendly amendments*.

At Chesapeake Natives, we grow and distribute to the public almost 200 **local ecotype native species or LENS** at our nursery in Rosaryville State Park in Prince George's County, MD. Local "ecotypes" are plants whose genetic heritage is of local, wild stock. LENS plants have coevolved with local insect populations so they bloom when they are most needed. LENS best contribute to the regionalized biodiversity critical to healthy food webs.

Our amendment is that LENS be identified as a subcategory of "Maryland Natives" – as Maryland natives whose genetic heritage is also from Maryland or at least from the Chesapeake Bay ecoregion. We believe this additional distinction will encourage native growers to pay closer attention to their seed sources and to seek out seed with local provenance. We might also include identification and even mapping of local seed sources as a responsibility for the Native Plant Specialist." I would be happy to work with the sponsor and Committee to create such an amendment.

In closing, I extend an open invitation to members of the Committee to come and visit our local ecotype native plant (LENS) nursery at Mt Airy in beautiful Rosaryville State Park.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.