



P.O. Box 278
Riverdale, MD 20738

Committee: Environment and Transportation

Testimony on: HB631 “Natural Resources - Land Conservation - Establishment of Goals and Programs (Maryland the Beautiful Act)”

Position: Support

Hearing Date: February 22, 2023

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly supports HB631, the Maryland the Beautiful Act. This bill establishes a state goal of 30% of Maryland lands conserved by 2030 and 40% of lands conserved by 2040. To accomplish this goal the bill authorizes the existing state Smart Growth Subcabinet to develop and update every five years a plan to meet these goals. Within the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), it creates several categories of funding to protect cultural, historical, forested, and agricultural lands from development. These programs will be administered by the Maryland Environmental Trust (MET).

The programs include 1) a \$10 million Local Land Trust Revolving Loan Fund, a one-time 2025 expense, to enable land trusts to quickly secure funds for newly available land and conservation easements and repay the loan at no lower than 1 point below the prime interest rate; additionally, \$235,000 shall be allocated to the MET each year for 2) Land Trust Capacity grants in support of monitoring and stewardship scholarships, equipment, and organizational trainings (\$50K); 3) Stewardship Grants to land trusts to improve monitoring and stewardship of Maryland’s most important eased agricultural lands, forested lands, or lands facing a high degree of invasive species and/or climate change related threats and damage (\$50K); and 4) Citizen Stewardship Awards to help community organizations develop innovative solutions to local environmental challenges (\$135K).

The Maryland the Beautiful bill this year is not completely the same as last year's bill. The ten million dollar rapid response Local Land Trust Revolving Loan Fund was a component of last year’s bill. However, the tree stewardship funding in the 2022 bill passed last year as part of another bill, and this year a different bill (HB503, which we also strongly support) addresses creating urban greenspaces, which was formerly part of the 2022 bill. New in this year's bill are the small grants to citizen community groups and land trusts to help these types of organizations maintain and steward these new lands.

The Sierra Club strongly supports this investment in the conservation of lands that help protect our communities from the ongoing effects of climate change.¹ Conserved natural places also provide clean water, clean air, wildlife habitat, protection from extreme temperatures, and flood control.² A recent statewide study of changes in forest cover and tree canopy in Maryland found that “protected lands experienced a significantly lower rate of forest loss and a much higher rate

¹ Sierra Club (N.D.) [30X30 Conservation Agenda](#).

² Chesapeake Conservancy (November 16th, 2022). [New study finds forest conservation measures successful in reducing Maryland forest loss, state has opportunity to achieve net forest gain.](#)

of total tree canopy increase compared with statewide rates. We conclude that protection benefits forest conservation in Maryland and leads to forest expansion." ³

In addition to these concrete benefits, this bill will move Maryland closer to the the United States federal government National Goal of 30% of US lands and waters conserved, and wildlife corridors connected by 2030.⁴

A related benefit of conserving more Maryland lands is the beneficial effect on the declining indicators of the state of nature. The first global-scale study of the links between people and nature found that global ecosystems have declined by 47%, 25% of species are threatened with extinction, the biomass of wild mammals has fallen by 82%, and 72% of indicators of nature that are important for quality of life for humans showed declines.⁵ This study found that strengthening environmental laws and their implementation was one of the five most effective levers for stopping these declines. Here in Maryland, according to the DNR's 2015-2025 Maryland State Wildlife Action Plan, "there is clear consensus that the loss and degradation of habitats across the state from unplanned growth and unsustainable consumption remain the primary overarching threat to Species of Greatest Conservation Need, as is true nationwide."⁶ Given the number and size of the threats, this bill will help address this urgent need in a fiscally responsible manner.

A final benefit of this bill is increasing environmental justice, which is emerging as a central priority for environmental protection efforts. One of the goals of the bill is "improving access to nature for all individuals in the state, including communities of color and economically disadvantaged communities."

Data show that given the massive challenges of climate change, conserving lands is a vital tool in our toolbox for protecting people. The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly urges a favorable report for Maryland the Beautiful.

Lily Fountain
Chair, Natural Places Committee
Lily.Fountain@MDSierra.org

Josh Tulkin
Chapter Director
Josh.Tulkin@MDSierra.org

³ Harry R. Hughes Center for Agro-Ecology, University of Maryland College of Agriculture & Natural Resources, Chesapeake Conservancy, & University of Vermont (November, 2022). [Technical Study on Changes in Forest Cover and Tree Canopy in Maryland.](#)

⁴ White House (December 20, 2021) [FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration Celebrates Expansion of Locally-Led Conservation Efforts in First Year of "America the Beautiful" Initiative.](#)

⁵ Diaz, S. et al. (20219). [Pervasive human-driven decline of life on Earth points to the need for transformative change.](#) *Science*, 366, (6471), eaax3100. DOI: 10.1126/science.aax3100.

⁶ Maryland Department of Natural Resources (2015). [Maryland State Wildlife Action Plan 2015-2025](#) , chapter 5.