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Saving the Chesapeake's Great Rivers and Special Places

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February 27, 2023

The Honorable Kumar P. Barve
Chair, Environment and Transportation
Committee
Maryland House of Delegates
251 House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

The Honorable Dana Stein
Vice Chair, Environment and Transportation
Committee
Maryland House of Delegates
251 House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: HB 723 – Forest Preservation and Retention - Favorable

Dear Chair Barve, Vice Chair Stein and members of the Environment and Transportation Committee,

On behalf of Chesapeake Conservancy, I would like offer our strong support for HB 723 concerning Natural Resources – Forest Preservation and Retention.

Chesapeake Conservancy joined the Harry R. Hughes Center for Agro-Ecology and the University of Vermont to complete a *Technical Study on Changes in Forest Cover and Tree Canopy in Maryland*, released in November 2022. The study is the most comprehensive to date on the state of Maryland's forests, and allowed the research team to make the following conclusions with high confidence:

1. Since the passing of the Forest Conservation Act in 1991, the rate of forest loss across the state has slowed, approaching stabilization, but the trend is still negative - a conclusion that all three data sources agree on. The slowing rate of loss between 2000 and today occurred while the state population grew by 17%.
2. However, trends at the county level show concerning trends and very different patterns of change across the state. The permanent loss of forests to development is concentrated in Central Maryland, where two counties, Prince Georges and Montgomery, represented over 40% of the forest loss to development across the state; and 5 counties (adding Anne Arundel, Charles and Baltimore Counties) had over 70% of the forest loss to development across the state.
3. The study also examined opportunities to increase forest and tree canopy across the state with these key findings:
 - a) The state has accelerated investment in tree planting in recent years, but experts advise it will take 5 to 15 years for those plantings to reach sufficient size to impact tree canopy area.
 - b) Existing mature trees about 15 to 50 years old generate the largest increases in tree canopy area - therefore conserving moderate-aged trees will have the greatest impact on forest area.

- c) We saw tree canopy area increase in two key areas: 1) in protected areas, where we expected forests would be protected but saw a 2,000 acre net gain in tree canopy area, and 2) in agricultural areas where the increased area in riparian forest buffers was clearly visible in the data.

These findings all point towards the positive impact forest conservation legislation has had on Maryland's forests and the potential for policies to achieve no net forest loss and transition to forest gain, a policy we urge the state to adopt. With the impacts of climate change already being felt across the state, including the increase we've seen both in flash flooding and extreme heat in our cities we need the benefits trees provide more than ever. Reasonable measures to tilt the balance from forest loss to gain will provide great benefits to our communities, our environment and our quality of life.

HB 723 will help Maryland to achieve net forest gain and tree canopy gain through several provisions, including those that would protect priority forest areas and reduce forest fragmentation. If passed, this legislation would contribute to the conservation of more forest and tree canopy across Maryland, and importantly it would give local governments greater flexibility to pursue forest conservation in ways that meet local needs and advance equity.

Thank you for considering this testimony. I fully support HB 723 and I urge a favorable report on this important legislation.

Sincerely,



Joel Dunn
President and CEO
Chesapeake Conservancy