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CHIEF DEPUTY MAJORITY WHIP

Environment and Transportation  
Committee

*Subcommittees*

Chair, Land Use and Ethics

Motor Vehicle and Transportation



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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**Testimony in Support of HB 874**

Testimony by Delegate Vaughn Stewart

March 9, 2023 • Environment & Transportation Committee

**What the bill does:**

HB874 establishes an Environment and Natural Resources Monitoring Unit within the Office of the Attorney General. The Unit would consist of specialized attorneys and investigators trained to prosecute cases against those who violate State criminal environmental and natural resources laws. This is based on the Federal Department of Justice's Environment and Natural Resources Division (ENRD). This unit would also be tasked with working with adjacent states and the federal ENRD to ensure compliance across jurisdictional boundaries. The bill also allows for the Unit to assist the Secretaries of the Environment and Natural Resources in bringing a civil action regarding a violation of the civil environmental laws of the State.

**Why the bill is important:**

Overfishing and poaching are two of the greatest threats to the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. These illegal actions deplete the amount of marine life in the water, causing the ecosystem to collapse, and they are rarely the target of an attorney. Currently, local offices of the State's Attorney place little to no importance on prosecuting environmental crimes; these cases usually are assigned to the most inexperienced prosecutor, if they are pursued at all. Generally, only the largest cases are considered worth fighting. In 2014, poachers Terry Myrick and John Messenger were caught exceeding their daily limit of striped bass by 532 pounds. They were brought to trial and faced fines of \$400,000 each<sup>1</sup>. Overfishing and poaching are only two examples of natural resource crime, which can also include illegal trapping, overhunting, dumping toxins, wildlife trafficking, illegal logging, and more.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.onthewater.com/striped-bass-poachers-busted-in-maryland>

A specialized unit within the Office of the Attorney General would have the time and resources to hold bad actors such as Myrick and Messenger accountable for their destructive actions. Such a Unit would also be able to compensate those who are negatively impacted by natural resource violations.

**Why the committee should vote favorably:**

This bill won't create any new environmental or natural resources laws or causes of action. It is simply about ensuring that the laws we already have in place are enforced by investigators and prosecutors who are experts in this very complex and specialized part of the law. This bill is meant to assist, rather than target, the watermen whose livelihoods depend upon a healthy Bay ecosystem. The Unit would protect these professionals from the bad actors who destroy the ecosystems and pollute the water. This legislation recognizes the importance of the State's natural resources as well as the Chesapeake Bay and the thousands of people and families who rely on it. **I urge a favorable report.**