

March 1, 2023

House Environment and Transportation Committee
Room 251
House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: House Bill 932 – Oysters – Rotational Harvest – Pilot Program

Position: **OPPOSE**

Dear Chairman Barve and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 932. We, the undersigned, represent the thousands of oyster gardeners participating in community-based restoration of the Bay's oyster resource each year.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation's Maryland Oyster Gardening Program and the Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) Marylanders Grow Oysters Program were established to empower local citizens who wanted to make a difference in recovering the Bay's oyster populations. Each year, oyster gardeners receive several thousand oyster spat to grow out in cages hanging from their docks or on their property. Oyster gardeners tend these cages carefully during the growing season, cleaning off excess algae, removing sediment and ensuring the oysters are growing well. This close care and dedication pays off at the end of the season when these oysters are collected and placed in oyster sanctuaries throughout the Bay.

Through these innovative programs, oyster gardeners have planted more than 20 million oysters on sanctuary bars throughout Maryland waters. Because these oysters are grown for a year in a protected environment, they are of larger size when placed on sanctuary reefs. This affords them higher survival, greater reproductive capacity, and higher filtration rates than smaller oysters.

Oysters are the Bay's most prodigious filters and an important keystone in the ecosystem. They provide habitat to other fish and shellfish species, they clean our water, and they reduce nutrient pollution. That is why we dedicate countless hours to the care and husbandry of our oyster 'gardens.'

House Bill 932 would require DNR to open the Little Choptank and Lower Mainstem oyster sanctuaries to harvest, which includes areas that have received annual plantings by oyster gardeners. While smaller in scale than state-supported restoration projects, we believe our significant investments of time and effort deserve protection from harvest. Before targeting sanctuaries, which have received significant restoration investment from watershed organizations and oyster gardeners, we urge the state to direct any investigations into the value of rotational harvest to the more than 300,000 acres of Maryland's bay bottom currently open to harvest. Protecting these sanctuaries from harvest would allow the oysters to grow, reproduce, and create self-sustaining populations that are so critical to the oyster's recovery.

We urge the Committee to protect the investments of the hundreds of Maryland citizens contributing to oyster restoration annually, and we respectfully request an unfavorable report on House Bill 932.

Sincerely,

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