



March 1, 2023

Committee: Environment and Transportation

Testimony on: HB0273 – Natural Resources – Forest Protection and Retention

Position: Support

The Maryland Ornithological Society (MOS) strongly supports HB0723 and requests a favorable report from the Environment and Transportation Committee.

HB0723 will update the Forest Conservation Act (FCA) of 1991, which has been found to be inadequate to protect Maryland's priority forests or forest canopy goals. HB0273 will strengthen forest goals and definitions, which will preserve more forest land and tree canopy, while giving local governments more flexibility to help meet local development issues.

A study commissioned by the General Assembly in 2021, Maryland suffered a net loss of over 19,000 acres of forests between 2013 and 2018.¹ Forest losses continue as does forest fragmentation. This is particularly acute in suburban counties.

Forests are very important for mitigating the continuing decline in our bird populations. A recent, much-cited, study has shown that North America has lost 3 billion birds, 29% of its total population, since the 1970s.² Eastern forest bird populations have fallen by 27% since 1970. Aside from forest clearing, fragmentation is another threat. Many species require large, unbroken blocks of forest. Intact forests also serve to sequester carbon, a major factor in climate change. Climate change is yet another factor threatening our bird populations. Two-thirds of North America's birds face an increasing risk of extinction from global warming, 389 species are at risk.³

Birds provide important ecosystem services, such as pollination, pest control, seed dispersal. Meanwhile, birding itself contributes significantly to Maryland's economy. An estimated 900,000 residents and non-residents enjoy birding in the state. While Marylanders generated \$483 million from wildlife-watching activities in 2011, the Total Industrial Output (TIO), which includes, direct, indirect, and induced effects, totaled over \$909 million, produced 10,807 full- and part-time jobs, and generated \$88.4 million in state and local tax revenue. Nationally, Americans who watch and feed birds contribute \$41 billion to the nation's economy every year.⁴

Lastly, retention of forest, and ideally, increase in forest cover, in the Chesapeake Bay watershed has been recommended for over 30 years as one of the most effective means of reducing pollutant runoff to the estuary. Forests also absorb runoff and play a major role in controlling flooding, a growing concern in this time of climate change. Reduction of non-point source pollution will have major benefits

for wildlife, including birds, fisheries, the economy of Bay communities and for Maryland itself.⁵ Forested riparian buffers are also low-tech but effective means of reducing runoff from farms.

In conclusion, MOS believes that an update to the FCA, which will better protect Maryland's priority forests and expand our tree canopy to the benefit of our birds, is very much needed. We ask the Committee to issue a favorable report on HB0723.

Sincerely,

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¹ Wheeler, Timothy, Maryland still losing forest and trees, though at a slower rate, study finds, Bay Journal, Nov. 18, 2022, https://www.bayjournal.com/news/growth_conservation/maryland-still-losing-forests-and-trees-though-at-a-slower-rate-study-finds/article_b1ddd3b0-675e-11ed-9ea9-072671365ff9.html

² Rosenberg, et al, Decline of the North American Avifauna, Science, vol 366, issue 6461, pp. 120-124, 4 October 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335939269_Decline_of_the_North_American_avifauna

³ State of the Birds, 2022, Key Findings, <https://www.stateofthebirds.org/2022/state-of-the-birds-at-a-glance/>

⁴ US Fish and Wildlife Service, Economic Impact: Birds, Birdwatching and the U.S. Economy, November 16, 2017, <https://www.fws.gov/birds/bird-enthusiasts/bird-watching/valuing-birds.php>

⁵ Forest Service, United States Department of Agriculture, Chesapeake Forest Restoration Strategy, September 2020, https://d18lev1ok5leia.cloudfront.net/chesapeakebay/cst91_chesapeake_forest_restoration_strategy_web_508_final.pdf