

February 27, 2024

Senator Brian J. Feldman
Maryland Senate
2 West Miller Senate Office Building
11 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Senator Cheryl C. Kagan
Maryland Senate
2 West Miller Senate Office Building
11 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Senators Feldman, Kagan and members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee,

I am Mark Conway, Executive Vice President of External Affairs for Chesapeake Conservancy. On behalf of Chesapeake Conservancy, I write to urge your support for the Wildlife - Protections and Road Crossings (SB 0902) sponsored by Senator Lewis Young and to move this bill favorably from committee.

SB 0902 is a critical step in mitigating one of the biggest threats to our wildlife here in Maryland. While the focus of the Chesapeake Conservancy is most often that of protecting critical habitat, preserving sites of historical and cultural significance, and providing access to our treasured Chesapeake Bay for all; reducing the impact of roads will expand our shared conservation mission to disturbed areas that would otherwise continue to degrade and become less biodiverse over time. We believe this creates a unique opportunity to help enact positive change in many places where our residents live, enjoy, and travel through. Habitat fragmentation and road mortality can be the sole cause of a local wildlife population to blink out. Even if not a protected or rare species that may be disappearing from the wider landscape or even nationwide, many populations represent both an important ecological value as well as that of a unique natural heritage for a community. So many of these places may otherwise lose a particular species locally for future generations to enjoy if habitat is not connected or threats from roads reduced.

We have ambitious goals which include our support for the creation of a National Recreation Area here in the Chesapeake watershed as well as conserving 30% of the land by 2030. However, these bold initiatives do not sufficiently address the fact that so much of our beautiful state is already developed with fragments of habitat and pockets of important wildlife populations still embedded within areas where roadways present a major impediment to their survival. SB 0902 allows the state to change course for those still special places that shoulder the impact that comes from more diverse uses, allowing our population to strike a more significant equilibrium.

In many cases just considering wildlife and its need to retain connectivity between habitat areas when designing our infrastructure can provide an immense benefit to those populations. We are fortunate that a wealth of case studies from across the world already exist, with many modern engineering elements having proven to be highly effective in protecting wildlife from harm associated with roadways. By supporting the best, up-to-date research, we can bolster the understanding of behavior for impacted species such as migration patterns, habitat use, population densities, and natural history as it pertains to road impact. This will allow for precise and more cost effective actions. By strengthening and properly funding the working relationships between responsible agencies, many choices made in designs of new infrastructure and the repairs of existing can mitigate the destruction of wildlife populations with improved efficiency and measurable metrics.

Roads also present a hazard for our population as wildlife collisions are numerous and sometimes quite dangerous for vehicle operators. There is also the less discussed weight of seeing constant, unnecessary loss of wildlife on roads presents a significant mental health toll on many members of our communities who feel hopeless to loss of the natural world around us. This bill can show that we not only have compassion and awareness for the problem but that we will act now to prevent further destruction and even restore populations before it is too late.

This bill is a rare opportunity to correct the actions of the past while also setting forth a new vision for how to coexist with some of our most treasured inhabitants of Maryland without sacrificing the necessary progress required to support our growing state.

Thank you for considering my testimony, I urge your support for SB 0902.