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SPEAKER PRO TEM

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Delegate Dana Stein Testimony in Support of HB 807

Natural Resources - Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Surveys

Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV)—grasses, algae, and other plants that are rooted and grow completely underwater—provide numerous benefits to the ecosystems in the Chesapeake Bay, particularly by providing habitat for crabs, fish, and other aquatic organisms. In addition, SAVs help prevent erosion, remove sediments, and absorb nutrients in the Bay.

The 2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement set a goal of restoring 185,000 total acres of SAV Bay-wide, with 130,000 acres to be restored by 2025. However, only about 76,462 acres have been restored to date, leaving the Bay 53,538 acres short of the 2025 goal.

This lack of progress has made it important that existing SAV beds and their seed banks be protected to meet restoration goals. These areas have the most appropriate bottom type to enable SAVs to grow. Since 2001, DNR has mapped SAV Protection Zones in the Bay using the Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences (VIMS) annual aerial flyover survey to delineate the zones. However, the cost of these surveys increases every year, and results are dependent on weather and water clarity. It can also take up to a year for images to be processed and GIS maps produced. Such a lag time can result in situations, such as in 2023, when 5,000 acres of SAV Protection Zones were removed while SAV beds expanded by only 12% Bay-wide.

This bill enables DNR to use any other survey methods that obtain data pertaining to SAVs, in addition to the VIMS surveys. But first, under the bill, DNR is to study and report on the implications and feasibility of using alternative methods other than an aerial survey to delineate SAV protection zones, by the end of 2024.

This change would give DNR the ability to utilize modern data-collection methods, such as satellite or drone imagery and machine-learning-assisted processing, which could improve the accuracy of SAV mapping. This modernization would ensure that SAV Protection Zones remain up-to-date and reflect current conditions in the Bay.