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Testimony in SUPPORT of House Bill 807 – Natural Resources – Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Surveys

Environment and Transportation Committee
February 21, 2024

Dear Chair Korman and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in **SUPPORT OF HB807**, on behalf of Arundel Rivers Federation. Arundel Rivers is a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection, preservation, and restoration of the South, West and Rhode Rivers with over 3,500 supporters. Our mission is to work with local communities to achieve clean, fishable, and swimmable waterways for present and future generations.

Submerged aquatic vegetation, or “SAV,” are a critical part of the Chesapeake ecosystem – providing food, habitat and oxygen, while also absorbing nutrients, trapping sediment, and preventing erosion. SAV contributes to better water quality, benefiting the economy, society, and ecology of the Bay. As part of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement, signed in 2014, Maryland has committed to increasing SAV habitat to 185,000 acres of underwater grasses in the Bay.

To assist in reaching and understanding our progress towards Maryland’s SAV habitat goals and protecting SAV beds, SAV Protection Zones are delineated by the Department to protect SAV beds from the impacts of clam harvesting, specifically the hydraulic escalator clam dredge. These Zones are delineated using data collected annually by the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS), which relies on cooperative weather, funding, and seasonably appropriate timing for all native SAV species.

HB807 will broaden the accepted measures of identifying SAV Protection Zones by including “observed” SAV by additional survey methods approved by the Department of Natural Resources. **Expanding the definition of “survey” to include this new method will allow for species that are traditionally missed by VIMS annual fly-overs, such as horned pondweed, to be considered in SAV Protection Zones and to count towards our restoration habitat goals.**

The South, West, and Rhode Rivers have reportedly had little to no SAV growth in the past decade according to the VIMS aerial survey. However, Arundel Rivers coordinates the SAV Watcher Volunteer program, which has resulted in multiple beds of horned pondweed identified, yet not counted towards our restoration goals by the state, in these waterways. This program is designed to train volunteers and nonprofit organizations to survey SAV beds as a way to ground-truth the VIMS data. Beds of horned pondweed are often missed during VIMS aerial flyovers because it is an early season blooming grass and it is not in peak biomass during the fly-overs. It would be logical and beneficial to utilize the robust set of data collected by trained citizen scientists as an additional method of surveying for SAV.

Arundel Rivers Federation encourages the protection of SAV to improve local water quality, fisheries economy, and meet our restoration goals, and respectfully requests a **FAVORABLE REPORT on HB807**.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Elle Bassett".

Elle Bassett
South, West and Rhode Riverkeeper
Arundel Rivers Federation