

Wednesday, March 6, 2024

TO: Marc Korman, Chair of the House Environment and Transportation Committee, and Committee Members

FROM: Humna Sharif, The Nature Conservancy, Climate Adaptation Manager; Cait Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, State Policy Manager

POSITION: Support HB 1375 Environmental Justice - Identification of and Investment in Overburdened and Underserved Communities - Report

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports HB 1375 offered by Delegate Rosenberg. TNC is a global conservation organization working to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Maryland, our work focuses on delivering science-based, on-the-ground solutions that secure clean water and healthy living environments for our communities, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing resilience in the face of a changing climate. We are dedicated to a future where people and nature thrive together.

HB 1375 requires the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) to submit an annual report to the Governor and General Assembly by December 31st each year, identifying overburdened and underserved communities in Maryland, and sharing the percentage of spending for investments that benefited overburdened and underserved communities during the prior fiscal year. Through this legislation, MDE will report on investments made through the department itself, and through the Maryland Energy Administration, the Maryland Department of Labor, the Department of Human Services, the Department of Transportation, the Department of Commerce, the Military Department, the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Health, and any other relevant agencies and programs that impact Maryland's overburdened and underserved communities. This legislation also tasks MDE with making specific recommendations to improve efforts to identify and provide assistance to overburdened and underserved communities, including legislative and administrative changes to Maryland's agencies and programs.

This legislation is an important step forward for decision-makers to understand and meet the needs of Maryland's overburdened, underserved, and environmental justice communities. Climate change impacts, and historical pollution are not equitably distributed among all Marylanders. Often, the communities most at risk from climate change impacts, including but not limited to extreme weather events, flooding, heatwaves, and droughts, are the communities that have faced systemic barriers to accessing funding sources. HB 1375 creates a mechanism for identifying gaps and then improving investment in Maryland communities where this change is most needed. TNC stands by the principle that everyone deserves clean land, clean water and, clean air.

Within the suite of environmental justice legislation under consideration in the 2024 General Assembly Session, passing HB 1375 would add to Maryland's robust commitment towards achieving equity. MDE, under Secretary Serena McIlwain's leadership, has articulated a deep commitment to addressing historic injustices in communities located next to industry that have been exposed to higher pollution levels. We must create the enabling mechanisms through legislation that give Maryland agencies the tools to identify areas where resources are most needed.

HB 1375 acknowledges historical disparities and works towards environmental justice by requiring MDE to actively consider and suggest next steps to mitigate harms to underserved and overburdened communities. TNC commends Delegate Rosenberg for introducing this bill. HB 1375 is a step in the right direction towards building restorative justice within our state's decision-making processes.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on HB 1375.