



Maryland Catholics for Our Common Home

Responding to the cry of the Earth
and the cry of the poor.

Hearing before the House Environment and Transportation Committee
Maryland General Assembly
February 21, 2024

**Statement of Support (FAVORABLE with AMENDMENT)
of Maryland Catholics for Our Common Home on
HB 24, Environment - Impact of Environmental Permits and State Agency Actions**

Maryland Catholics for Our Common Home (MCCH) is a lay-led organization of Catholics from parishes in the three Catholic dioceses in Maryland: the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the Archdiocese of Washington, and the Diocese of Wilmington. It engages in education about, and advocacy based upon, the teachings of the Catholic Church relating to care for creation and respect for all life. We are a grassroots voice for the understanding of Catholic social teaching, which is held by a wide array of Maryland Catholics—over 400 Maryland Catholics have already signed our statement of support for key environmental bills in this session of the General Assembly—but it should be distinguished as an organization from the Maryland Catholic Conference, which represents the public policy interests of the bishops who lead these three dioceses.

Because we are attuned by our faith to hear both the cry of our distressed Earth and the cry of the poor who suffer first and most from environmental degradation and climate disruptions, MCCH would like to express our support for the passage of **House Bill 24, Environment - Impact of Environmental Permits and State Agency Actions** (also referred to as the MDE Permitting Authority Bill), **with amendment.**

MCCH agrees with the need for this bill as stated in a Fact Sheet that has been circulated by a coalition of groups supporting the bill: “For generations, Maryland has made decisions about locating harmful, unhealthy, and potentially dangerous projects in ways that have overburdened many communities in the state, especially communities of color and low-wealth communities...This bill would ensure that if the Maryland Department of the Environment determines that issuing an approval for a new permit may impact an underserved community or an overburdened community, the Department shall conduct a climate and environmental equity evaluation of the permit, and work with the Maryland Department of Health on a health impact assessment...[It will also require] State agencies to review and report annually on whether their decisions contribute to local deterioration of public health or increases in pollution associated with health and environmental burdens for underserved and overburdened communities.” And, importantly, it will provide opportunities for people living in the impacted communities to contribute to the process of evaluating how permits will impact their lives.

From our faith perspective this is an important bill. In his 2015 encyclical, entitled *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*,¹ Pope Francis called for a *comprehensive* response to protecting God's creation—one that addresses, simultaneously, three related crises: (1) the climate crisis brought on by human-generated emissions into the atmosphere, especially CO₂, N₂O, and methane; (2) the widespread despoliation of our environment (our air, water and soils that sustain all life) by human activities; and (3) the disproportionate impact on the poor of climate and environmental collapse. This bill addresses all three crises in a comprehensive way.

This bill speaks to the essence of how we cherish, treat and value one another—as human beings and as part of nature—with the respect and dignity each deserves. Pope Francis has written that “everything is connected” and “concern for the environment thus needs to be joined in a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society. A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion, and concern for our fellow human beings” (*Laudato Si'*, no. 91). A bill such as this helps public officials charged with care for the environment and care for the poor to be ever mindful of the consequences of their permitting actions on human society and all of nature.

Even so, MCCH agrees with a number of other groups supporting the bill that there is a missing element that needs to be addressed by an amendment as the bill proceeds through the legislative process—the application of the permitting authorities granted in the bill to permits that regulate a facility's ongoing air emissions as part of their operations. Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'*, addresses air pollution with these words: “Some forms of pollution are part of people's daily experience. Exposure to atmospheric pollutants produces a broad spectrum of health hazards, especially for the poor, and causes millions of premature deaths” (*Laudato Si'*, no. 20). Nothing is more essential than clean air to breathe. The Book of Genesis tells us that it was our first gift from God (Gen 2:7), the very first breath of God that gave us life. We believe that protecting the clean air necessary for human life is a paramount duty for people of faith.

The State of Maryland has too often failed, in its permitting decisions, to assure clean air for all. Indicators related to air pollution are the largest category of Environmental Justice indicators included in the Maryland definition of communities that are "overburdened" by economic, social, and ecological harms. We have heard time and again that air pollution is the main concern of communities located near polluting facilities. The cry of the poor could not be clearer and more distinct than it is in these communities. To address the pollution from facilities contributing to health disparities in overburdened communities, the list of covered permits under this bill should include Title V air emission permits (also known as Part 70 permits). Our compassionate concern for all God's people, especially those with little other choice than to live in these overburdened communities, requires that permits that regulate a facility's ongoing air emissions be subject to the environmental justice evaluation **and** permitting authorities provided in House Bill 24.

For these reasons we strongly urge your support for this bill. Thank you for your consideration of our views and our respectful request for a **favorable with amendment (to include Title V air emissions permits as covered permits)** report on House Bill 24.

¹ The English text of the encyclical, to which the paragraph numbers in the following parentheses refer, can be found at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.