

Good Afternoon, Chair, Vice Chair, and members of the Committee.

My name is Bryan Price, and I am here today to strongly oppose HB 1270, a bill that threatens Maryland's Wildlands, conservation laws, and long-term environmental and financial interests.

As a lifelong Marylander, I grew up learning about the importance of Wildlands, conservation, and the Chesapeake Bay. I had many formative experiences growing up in the mountains of western Maryland, and it is a place that is dear to me. Like me, my peers were, and our students today are taught an early age, that protecting our natural resources is not just a responsibility but a core part of our state's identity. Programs in our schools instill in us the importance of stewardship, reminding us that these lands, waters, and ecosystems belong not just to us, but to future generations. I was actively involved in FFA's Conservation Club, where I worked on projects that reinforced these values. Additionally, I have secured grants to teach children about environmental stewardship, helping instill in young Marylanders the same principles that previous generations passed down to me. HB 1270 is a massive course reversal from these long-standing priorities, undermining the conservation ethic that has guided our state for decades and is in conflict with our state's soul.

One of the areas at risk under this bill is Big Savage Mountain, home to over a dozen rare species. These Wildlands provide critical, undisturbed habitats for sensitive plant and animal species that rely on large, contiguous tracts of forest to survive. If transmission lines are constructed here, it would fragment these ecosystems, disrupt rare and at-risk wildlife, and permanently alter one of Maryland's most biodiverse landscapes. Conservation isn't just about protecting what we can see today, it's about ensuring that the next generation can experience the same rich, thriving ecosystems that we were entrusted with.

Another critical area at risk is Dan's Mountain, home to the northern long-eared bat, a federally protected species. Bat populations in Maryland have already been devastated by a deadly fungal infection known as white-nose syndrome, which has pushed the northern long-eared bat to the brink of extinction. Transmission line construction in this critical habitat would further threaten one of Maryland's most imperiled species, adding habitat destruction to the many challenges it already faces. Bats play a crucial role in Maryland's ecosystems, controlling insect populations and maintaining ecological balance. If we allow this destruction, we may be accelerating the disappearance of a species already on the edge. And need we be reminded of the chaos inflicted upon the world by one sick bat in China.

Bear Pen Run, another area under threat, is a large, unbroken tract of forest that provides essential habitat for forest interior dwelling species such as many songbirds, American black bears, bobcats, fishers, and salamanders. These species thrive best in large, contiguous patches of undisturbed forest. Fragmenting this habitat for industrial infrastructure such as transmission lines would devastate these sensitive species by increasing human encroachment, altering microclimates, and inviting invasive species. Maryland has worked hard to preserve these ecosystems, and HB 1270 threatens to undo that progress.

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources has warned that this bill jeopardizes federal funding Maryland receives for Wildlands protection. Allowing overhead transmission lines in these protected areas means Maryland must replace the lost land within three years, or risk losing vital federal conservation dollars. If suitable replacement land cannot be found, our state's conservation funding will be reduced, putting future environmental projects and land protection efforts in jeopardy. This is an irresponsible financial gamble that could cost taxpayers in the long run while offering little real benefit in return.

For decades, Maryland has had strong, science-based environmental laws designed to protect sensitive ecosystems. These laws require rigorous scientific, legal, and community review before making changes to Wildlands designations. HB 1270 undermines this careful process, creating a dangerous precedent where conservation laws can be weakened without adequate public input or environmental review. If this bill is passed, what's to stop future carve-outs for even more development in Wildlands? It opens the door to further rollbacks of conservation protections.

Supporters of HB 1270 claim the bill is necessary to meet energy demands, particularly for data centers. However, recent analyses suggest that Maryland's energy capacity has been underestimated, and that the actual demand for new transmission lines is questionable. Before permanently damaging Wildlands, we must conduct a comprehensive review of our existing energy infrastructure. New construction projects, especially those that harm conservation lands, should be pursued only when absolutely necessary, not based on outdated or exaggerated forecasts, especially those typical of companies like PSEG who was found liable in courts for millions of dollars in over stating the need for such transmission programs.

Currently, land management decisions for Wildlands are made by conservation experts with deep ecological knowledge. HB 1270 takes that authority away and hands it to the Public Service Commission, an entity with no specific expertise in conservation. The Public Service Commission's primary responsibility is utility regulation, not environmental

protection. If this bill passes, energy interests will be prioritized over conservation, directly contradicting the purpose of Wildlands protections. The General Assembly has a duty to protect these lands, and HB 1270 is an abdication of that responsibility.

Maryland's Wildlands belong to the people, and any decision affecting them should involve robust public participation. However, HB 1270 was introduced without sufficient stakeholder engagement, meaning that conservationists, hunters, anglers, outdoor enthusiasts, and local communities had no opportunity to weigh in. This lack of transparency raises serious concerns about the bill's intent and who stands to benefit. If major policy changes affecting public lands are being made, they should happen openly, with input from Marylanders, not behind closed doors at the request of private energy interests.

Wildlands are meant to remain unimpaired for future generations, protecting biodiversity, water quality, and carbon sequestration. HB 1270 directly contradicts the intent of Maryland's Wildlands Preservation statute, exposing these areas to industrial activities that could cause permanent environmental damage. Allowing transmission lines in Wildlands would fragment critical ecosystems, reducing habitat connectivity for wildlife. It would disrupt sensitive species, including the northern long-eared bat and over a dozen rare species in Big Savage Mountain. It would harm Maryland's water resources, as Wildlands serve as natural filters for our watersheds. It would degrade scenic and recreational value, threatening tourism, outdoor recreation, and local economies.

HB 1270 is an unnecessary and irresponsible bill that undermines conservation laws, weakens environmental protections, and threatens Maryland's financial and ecological future. Big Savage Mountain, Dan's Mountain, Bear Pen Run, and Maryland's Wildlands are irreplaceable. If we allow transmission lines today, what will we justify tomorrow? For these reasons, I urge the committee to reject HB 1270 and uphold Maryland's commitment to preserving its Wildlands for generations to come. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

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