

Testimony in Support of HB 631

Presented by Bryan Price

Maryland House of Delegates Hearing on HB 631

Chair, Vice Chair, and Esteemed Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of House Bill 631 (HB 631). My name is Bryan Price, and I am a Maryland resident dedicated to protecting our farmland, rural communities, and conservation lands from unjustified and destructive development. HB 631 is a necessary safeguard against eminent domain abuse, ensuring that landowners who have made the commitment to preserve their property through conservation easements are not forced to surrender it for corporate-driven infrastructure projects.

The Maryland Piedmont Reliability Project (MPRP) is a prime example of why HB 631 is essential. This proposed high-voltage transmission line would cut through the Maryland Piedmont region, threatening hundreds of acres of farmland, forests, and protected lands. Utility companies such as PSEG and regional transmission operators such as PJM Interconnection continue to pursue aggressive land acquisition strategies, leveraging eminent domain to force landowners into giving up their property. Many of these targeted lands have already been placed under conservation easements, legally binding agreements designed to protect them from exactly this kind of development. HB 631 ensures that those commitments are honored and that protected lands remain protected.

HB 631 amends Maryland's Real Property Law to explicitly prohibit the state, its agencies, and local governments from seizing land protected by permanent agricultural or conservation easements through eminent domain. This bill upholds the integrity of state and local preservation programs such as the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF), the Maryland Environmental Trust, and county-level conservation efforts. These programs were established to safeguard Maryland's agricultural and environmental heritage, and HB 631 ensures that they remain true to their mission.

For years, Maryland farmers and conservationists have placed their trust in preservation programs, believing that they would shield their land from industrial development. However, utility companies and energy developers have increasingly targeted these areas for large-scale infrastructure projects, undermining the very purpose of conservation easements. This is not only an attack on private property rights but also a betrayal of the commitments made to landowners who agreed to these easements in good faith. HB 631

restores that trust by reinforcing that land designated for preservation will not be subject to corporate land grabs disguised as public necessity.

Beyond the legal and economic implications, this is a deeply personal issue for many Marylanders, including myself. As someone who has spent countless hours fighting against the MPRP, I have seen the toll that eminent domain battles take on families and communities. Landowners who have made long-term commitments to conservation now find themselves in the untenable position of having to defend their rights against well-funded utility companies. Many of these farmers and land stewards made sacrifices to place their land under protection, ensuring that future generations could continue to benefit from Maryland's rich agricultural and natural resources. To see those protections disregarded for the sake of a transmission project that has not even fully explored modern grid alternatives is unacceptable.

This issue is especially meaningful to me because I come from a long line of Maryland farmers. My ancestors were among the original founders of Maryland, humble Quakers, Ark and Dove passengers, and eastern shore farmers who paved the way for the future of this state. They were stewards of the land, believing in the importance of hard work, sustainability, and preservation. Their commitment to farming and conservation helped shape Maryland into what it is today. As a child, I was actively involved in the Future Farmers of America (FFA), where I learned the values of land stewardship and the responsibility we have to protect our agricultural heritage. Supporting HB 631 is not just about fighting for policy, it is about honoring the contributions of Maryland's farmers, both past, present, and yes...future.

HB 631 is not just about stopping the MPRP; it is about preventing future projects from disregarding landowners' rights and conservation commitments. If passed, this legislation will take effect on October 1, 2025, blocking future attempts to seize preserved farmland for energy infrastructure projects. This is an essential step in protecting Maryland's agricultural legacy and environmental future.

Utility companies have alternatives. Instead of carving through farmland and conservation land, they should be required to modernize existing infrastructure, invest in smart grid technologies, and explore undergrounding transmission where necessary. HB 631 forces developers and policymakers to prioritize solutions that do not come at the expense of landowners who have already made their wishes clear: their land is not for sale, not for seizure, and not for development.

The passage of HB 631 sends a clear message: "Maryland stands with its farmers, conservationists, and property owners. We will not allow corporate utilities to override

legally binding agreements in the name of expediency. We will not allow preserved lands to be sacrificed for projects that have failed to justify their necessity. And we will not allow a broken system to dictate the future of Maryland's landscapes."

I urge the committee to support HB 631 and take a decisive step toward protecting Maryland's conservation lands, rural communities, and agricultural heritage.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

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