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HB1270 - Natural Resources - Wildland Areas - Overhead Transmission Lines
Hearing Date: Wednesday, March 6, 2025

UNFAVORABLE

***Potomac Riverkeeper Network:** Our mission is to protect the public's right to clean water in the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers and their tributaries. We stop pollution to enhance the safety of our drinking water, protect healthy river habitats, and enhance public use and enjoyment.*

Background of MD Wildlands Preservation System

The preservation of Wildlands in Maryland began in 1973. Since the start of the program, the General Assembly has designated 38 separate Wildland areas totaling 65,956 acres. The purpose of preserving a Wildland is stated in COMAR 08.01.02.02:

“A. Purpose. There is a State wildlands preservation system composed of areas in the State designated by the General Assembly as wildlands areas. The wildland areas shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the people of Maryland in a manner that will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wildlands, to provide for their protection, for the preservation of their wildland character, and for gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment. For a description of the boundaries of an individual wildland, see Natural Resources Article, §5-1203, Annotated Code of Maryland.”

There are two types of Wildlands. Type 1 is a primitive area untouched by urban civilization that protects watersheds that are ecologically vulnerable to human interference. Type 2 Wildland signifies an area of “importance for natural sciences and ecology with outstanding value for education, research and appreciation of natural processes.” Wildlands are separate from watershed management areas and State forests which allow activity such as forestry for lumber. These Wildlands are not only for the use and enjoyment of Maryland residents and tourists, but are key areas that allow protections for endangered species.

These state-owned Wildlands have been set aside and placed into preservation to maintain the wildness of these areas, which can only continue to occur by keeping urban infrastructure from fracturing the wildlands and threatening the habitats of aquatic and terrestrial species. Over 57% of the 65,956 acres are in the three western Maryland counties totaling 36,827 acres, many of which are in the Upper Potomac Watershed.



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SB399 Threatens the Preservation of Wildlands

HB1270 threatens the intent of the Wildland Preservation System that was instituted by the Maryland legislature. The bill claims that there is a public need to run overhead transmission lines through three Wildland areas: Big Savage Mountain, Bear Pen, and Dan's Mountain. These three Wildland areas preserve 8,443 acres. Big Savage Mountain was the first Wildland designated in 1973 and has maintained its Wildland Preservation Type 1 status for 52 years.

SB399 undermines the intent of the Wildland Preservation System to protect wildlife and habitat of sensitive and endangered species for the public good to experience an untouched natural setting with no urban civilization; which includes the construction of overhead power lines that will cut a 200 foot path through Preserved Wildlands; fracturing the vitality of the three Wildland areas. HB1270 proposes to sacrifice one "public good" for another. The overhead transmission lines are claimed to be a necessity for the public good. In actuality, the overhead transmission lines proposed by NextEra are intended to power the growing development of data centers that have their own environmental impacts on natural resources. It is not necessary to fracture preserved Wildlands when alternate routes are available. The only reason this bill is being proposed by NextEra is to reduce the costs associated with the construction of the overhead power lines. NextEra is recommending increasing their profits by sacrificing Maryland's system of preserving Wildlands.

Unfavorable Report for HB1270

As the Upper Potomac Riverkeeper, my mission is to protect the right for communities to have clean water for drinking, fishing and recreation and protect healthy river habitats. The Wildlands preserved in the State of Maryland have protected thousands of acres from the destruction of urban infrastructure, thereby protecting critical habitat. HB1270 will undermine the integrity of legislation that has been in place for 52 years and set a precedent that any for profit company can legislate a taking of Wildlands. I am requesting the Committee return an unfavorable decision.

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