

Tuesday, February 18, 2025

TO: Brian Feldman, Chair Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee; and Committee Members
FROM: Humna Sharif, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations; and Isaac Hametz, The Nature Conservancy, Baltimore Program Director
POSITION: Support SB 722 Department of the Environment - Ecological Restoration

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports SB 722 offered by Senators Henson and Augustine. This bill would allow the Maryland General Assembly to adopt a definition of ecological restoration. This definition is in line with the recent report released by Maryland Department of the Environment in its [Ecological Restoration Permitting Study Report](#) (2024). Passage of SB 722 would bring a consistent definition to our state's understanding of ecological restoration activities and associated project types.

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.

SB 722 recommends that the general assembly adopt the following definition for ecological restoration: An activity undertaken with the goal of recovering, re-establishing, or enhancing a degraded, damaged, or destroyed ecosystem through:

- 1) improvements to physical, chemical, or biological characteristics or processes;
- 2) returning natural or historical functions or services or
- 3) protecting or improving resiliency.

TNC is hopeful that SB 722 will help improve the permitting process for vital resiliency projects in the state, such as critical marsh and wetland restoration efforts. It is often the natural processes of ecosystems that are altered which then cause a disruption in that ecosystems' functions and services – specifically giving voice to natural processes in the legislation as is mentioned in the first bullet of the definition above would allow our state to have a broader outlook on what restoration actions are permitted.

Along Maryland's Chesapeake and Atlantic coasts, tidal wetlands act as the first line of defense against storms and rising seas and must be protected. Climate resilient marshes and coastlines provide seafood nurseries, sustaining Maryland's [\\$600 million fishing industry](#), but these vulnerable habitats are quickly disappearing due to sea level rise. Maryland will lose over [20% of all tidal wetlands by 2050](#) at current rates of sea level rise. Protecting these wetlands [safeguards communities](#), and continues to provide critical habitat for many iconic species, including the [threatened saltmarsh sparrow](#). If nothing is done, [75% of Maryland's tidal high marsh could be lost by 2100](#). This not only severely impacts rare and endangered species but also makes coastal communities more vulnerable to dangerous flooding. SB 722 is one step among many to help Maryland restore and protect vulnerable ecosystems in our state.

The Nature Conservancy commends Senators Henson and Augustine for introducing this legislation and we look forward to continuing to work with MDE on implementation of ecological restoration projects.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on SB 467.