

**Tuesday, February 11, 2025**

**TO:** Brian Feldman, Chair of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee;  
and Committee Members

**FROM:** Mariana Rosales, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Climate; Cait Kerr, The Nature  
Conservancy, State Policy Manager

**POSITION:** Oppose SB 399 Natural Resources – Wildland Areas – Overhead Transmission Lines

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) opposes SB 399, offered by Senator McKay. This bill proposes to exempt portions of the Big Savage Mountain Wildland, Bear Pen Wildland, and Dan’s Mountain Wildland from their current designation as protected wildland areas to facilitate constructing overhead transmission lines.

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 understand the need to deploy clean energy and build new transmission lines that will secure resilient energy resources in our state, but our approach must minimize harmful impacts on communities and the environment.

Preserving Maryland’s Wildland areas is incredibly important—not only for protecting biodiversity and ecological health, but also for providing unique recreational opportunities and climate resilience for current and future generations. SB 399 weakens protections for Maryland’s Wildlands setting precedent for allowing infrastructure projects on these protected lands without study or community input.

TNC recognizes the importance of addressing energy transmission needs; however, enacting a precedent-setting exemption to Wildlands protections prior to community or other stakeholder engagement should not be the path forward. There should be an exhaustive process to find alternative pathways and technological solutions before compromising protected areas. While it might be possible that a project running parallel (and contiguous) to existing transmission lines may be found to have a reduced impact on local communities, in comparison to new routes, there is currently insufficient evidence to confirm this as the best alternative. Therefore, we consider that at this stage these exemptions should not be granted. These types of exemptions should follow collecting strong evidence that current scientific knowledge, new environmental justice perspectives, and present-day conservation and mitigation strategies align with them.

While we have been informed by NextEra Energy that the Public Service Commission (PSC) cannot consider or analyze alternative routes without legislative action, it is important to first engage with communities before enacting a change to Wildlands. Including this route as an option within an open and transparent review process, rather than preemptively carving out protected lands, ensures that conservation and community priorities are maintained. Setting this

precedent would diminish the incentive to explore innovative transmission solutions that better align with the state's long-term environmental protection goals.

TNC urges the committee to reject SB 399 and instead promote solutions that align with Maryland's commitment to environmental stewardship and climate action. Let us work together to find alternatives that meet energy transmission needs without sacrificing our cherished natural landscapes.

**Therefore, we urge an unfavorable report on SB 399.**