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Feb 14, 2025

To: Chair Feldman and members of the Maryland Senate Committee on Education, Energy and the Environment

From: Jim Brown, Policy Director, Audubon Mid-Atlantic

Subject: Favorable Testimony for Maryland SB 722 Ecological Restoration

Audubon Mid-Atlantic submits this testimony in support of Senate Bill 722. Audubon Mid-Atlantic is the regional office of the National Audubon Society, representing over 35,000 Marylanders who advocate for the protection of birds, bird habitat, and policies aiming to protect both birds and human communities in the face of increasing environmental challenges, habitat loss, pollution, and climate change.

Science tells us birds are in decline due to climate change related habitat loss. 1/3 of all Maryland bird species experienced significant population declines in the past 50 years. SB 722 will position Maryland to slow this habitat loss while investing in natural systems to protect habitat, improve water quality and increase resiliency protections that the Chesapeake Bay, our tidal coastlines, forests and grasslands provide for the region's birds and people. One such program, Audubon's *Marshes for Tomorrow* initiative, works with state and federal government, local communities and non-government partners to maintain the best 29,000 acres of tidal salt marsh in Maryland, an ecosystem that is seriously at risk of erosion due to increased coastal flooding and sea level rise. As our [Marshes for Tomorrow](#) plan outlines, ecological restoration methods can save these vital marshes. Ecological restoration is an investment to support Maryland's economy, provide a protective buffer for coastal communities, strengthen our environment and save threatened species. Restoring these 29,000 acres helps protect imperiled wildlife, like the saltmarsh sparrow, which relies on these disappearing marshes for breeding. SB 722 will establish a solid building block for this approach and similarly important projects by establishing a consistent definition of ecological restoration in Maryland. A clear definition of Ecological Restoration will elevate these important projects and their many co-benefits to Maryland.

In 2024, as a result of 2022's HB 869 becoming law, The Maryland Department of the Environment released an *Ecological Restoration Study Report* recommending the General Assembly adopt the following definition for Ecological Restoration: "Activities 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 historic functions or services; or 3. protecting or improving resiliency." Audubon believes this is necessary because there is an inconsistent understanding of ecological restoration and associated project types. The report suggests that without a clear definition for ecological restoration across state agencies and with the public, confusion and miscommunication will persist over what projects are included in ecological restoration planning, funding and permitting processes.

Additionally Ecological Restoration and Marsh Restoration are both referenced as practices by Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) and Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in their

Climate Implementation Plans. MDE, in their plan, notes that “Maryland’s Climate Pollution Reduction Plan calls for natural climate solutions achieved through afforestation, forest and coastal wetland management.” DNR’s Climate Implementation Plan mentions, “DNR is currently pursuing the creation, protection, and restoration of wetlands to promote carbon sequestration through several means including the Natural Filters Program provided through the Chesapeake and Atlantic Coastal Bays Trust Fund. The Natural Filters Program restores wetlands and buffers on state and public lands to meet water quality goals.” Lastly, Maryland’s Climate Adaptation and Resilience Framework identifies ‘Nature-based design’ as a climate change adaptation through a state initiative entitled “Resiliency through Restoration.” Defining Ecological restoration as outlined in SB 722 will strengthen these already identified state policy and planning goals.

Protecting Maryland’s Chesapeake and Atlantic Coastal Bays tidal salt marshes is a top priority for Audubon in Maryland. A consistent definition of Ecological Restoration in Maryland will help Audubon, and our partners collaborate with Maryland State and Federal partners to promote and implement these practices. It will also help Maryland communicate how Ecological Restoration projects help the state reach our habitat, climate, and conservation goals. These disappearing marshes are critically important to Maryland’s cultural, economic, geographic and environmental identity. Investing in them will take a multipronged approach and significant collaboration. Having an agreed-upon definition of Ecological Restoration will help this collaboration. SB 722 helps advance these critical considerations for the benefits that the tidal salt marshes bring to Maryland’s bird habitat, our water quality, and local economies. Restoration of Maryland’s iconic salt marshes support a broad range of livelihoods and economies in Maryland.

Ecological Restoration of Maryland’s Tidal Salt Marshes directly support:

- Sustenance of fisheries, supporting over \$600 million of the Maryland seafood industry’s impact on the Maryland Economy
- Providing the places and natural infrastructure for \$951 million in outdoor recreation spending annually in coastal Maryland
- A protective natural buffer to the \$1 Billion agriculture economy of Maryland

Codifying a definition of Ecological Restoration in law tells the public, local government, state agencies and nongovernment partners that ecological restoration and natural climate solutions are valuable tools to help the state meet our climate goals, habitat goals, our Chesapeake and Coastal Bays water quality goals, our forest canopy coverage goals, and ever important tidal marsh conservation goals. Audubon believes Ecological Restoration should be an agreed-upon principle, practice and tool that the state has in its options to fund, permit and implement in saving Maryland’s iconic landscapes, and keeping our ecosystems healthy and vibrant. Doing so will keep our local economies viable, prevent the mass extinction of birds and protect Maryland residents’ lives, livelihoods and communities.

Senate Bill 722 will hold Maryland up as a national leader in habitat protection and conservation planning, while strengthening efforts to protect our important ecosystems.

Audubon Mid-Atlantic respectfully urges a favorable review of Senate Bill 722.

Thank You,

Jim Brown, Policy Director, Audubon Mid-Atlantic