



Testimony Supporting SB0978
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
February 25, 2025

Position: SUPPORT

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee,

I am an Assistant Professor in the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health working on clean water projects related to environmental justice for Maryland communities and I am writing to express my strong support of SB978, the CHERISH Our Communities Act. In my research I am partnering with the Potomac Riverkeeper Network and through this partnership I am seeing the disproportionate environmental and public health harms that environmental justice communities in Maryland face. The CHERISH Our Communities Act will address these harms to prioritize the health and well-being of all Marylanders and ensure that MDE's decision-making processes are transparent and inclusive.

Water is one of Maryland's most vital resources. The Chesapeake Bay, our rivers, and lakes are not only essential for the health of our ecosystems but also for the livelihoods of thousands of Marylanders who depend on these water bodies for fishing, tourism, and recreation. However, these resources have long been under threat from industrial pollution, and SB0978 presents a necessary step toward addressing this issue.

The Impact of Industrial Water Pollution

Industrial and military facilities in Maryland release significant quantities of pollutants into our waterways, including heavy metals, toxic chemicals, and untreated wastewater. These pollutants pose serious risks to human health, aquatic life, and overall environmental sustainability. Communities living near industrial sites are disproportionately affected by contaminated water, often leading to long-term health problems such as gastrointestinal issues, cancers, and developmental disorders in children.

Many of the toxic chemicals, include PFAS "forever chemicals", released into our waterways bioaccumulate in fish that many communities depend on for subsistence fishing. In fact, the Maryland Department of the Environment has recently warned that some of the fish from Maryland waterways may not be safe to eat due to contaminant levels in fish tissue, which can include mercury, PCBs (Polychlorinated Biphenyl) and PFAS. These same communities are often co-located near other industrial or pollution sources making the toxic exposures from this food source one of many other cumulative impacts on their health. Moreover, water pollution depletes aquatic biodiversity, harms fisheries, and diminishes the recreational and economic value of our natural waterways.

The Importance of SB0978

SB0978 is a crucial piece of legislation that strengthens oversight and enforcement regarding water pollution from industrial sources. It mandates stricter discharge limits, improves monitoring and reporting standards, and holds industries accountable for the contamination they cause. By ensuring that industrial facilities adopt best practices and utilize modern technologies to reduce pollution, SB0978 aims to protect the health of Maryland's water bodies and the people who rely on them.

This bill also emphasizes the importance of transparency. Requiring industries to provide regular, detailed reports on their emissions and effluents allows the public, as well as government agencies, to track pollution levels and respond to potential violations in a timely manner. Improved transparency not only helps enforce regulations but also promotes corporate responsibility.

Environmental Justice

SB0978 is also a significant step toward environmental justice. Low-income communities and communities of color are often the most affected by industrial pollution, living near these industrial facilities. The bill ensures that these vulnerable populations are protected by taking a holistic perspective when granting permits for industries to discharge pollutants into nearby water sources.

Economic and Environmental Balance

Some may argue that stricter regulations on industrial pollution may impose economic burdens on businesses. However, SB0978 strikes a balance between protecting our environment and allowing industries to thrive. Clean water is critical for economic development, and the long-term benefits of preserving our waterways far outweigh the short-term costs of compliance.

By passing SB0978, we are investing in the future of Maryland's environment, public health, and economy. Cleaner water means healthier communities, more sustainable fisheries, and increased opportunities for tourism and recreation, which are key economic drivers for our state.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I strongly urge the committee to support SB0978. The bill represents a comprehensive, fair, and forward-thinking approach to understanding the cumulative impacts of all environmental burdens, including water pollution from industrial sources. By incorporating all environmental burdens from air, water and food we will have a more comprehensive understanding of how the health of Marylanders' is affected by cumulative exposures.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I respectfully request a favorable report on SB0978.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Natalie Exum". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Natalie" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Exum".

Natalie Exum, PhD, MS
Assistant Professor
Department of Environmental Health and Engineering
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health