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SB 312 Natural Resources State Parks – Maryland Golden Ages Pass
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment
FAVORABLE
February 11, 2025

Good afternoon, Chair Feldman and members of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee. My name is Larry Zarzecki, and I am a volunteer with AARP Maryland. AARP Maryland is proud to be one of the largest membership-based organizations in the state, representing nearly 850,000 members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in strong support of SB 312 Natural Resources State Parks- Maryland Golden Ages Pass. I want to thank Senator Simonaire for introducing this bill during the 2025 legislative session.

AARP is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that empowers individuals to achieve their goals, strengthen communities, and advocate for critical issues affecting families—such as healthcare, employment and income security, retirement planning, affordable utilities, and protection from financial abuse.

SB 312 establishes that holders of the Maryland Golden Age Pass will receive free day-use entry at select state parks and will be exempt from boat launch fees. Additionally, the free day-use entry will apply to everyone traveling in the same vehicle with the pass holder under specified conditions.

AARP has consistently championed policies that enhance the financial security and overall well-being of older adults. Promoting access to recreational spaces like parks is one such policy, as it can improve physical and mental health while reducing financial burdens.

We draw inspiration from the U.S. National Park Service, which offers several fee-free days throughout the year, allowing access to iconic destinations like Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon. For frequent visitors, the **America the Beautiful National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass** provides unlimited access to more than 2,000 federal recreation sites for an annual fee of \$80. Discounted or free passes are also available to older adults, military members, students, and individuals with disabilities. For seniors, an annual pass costs \$20, while a lifetime pass is available for \$80.

In 2023, more than 325 million people visited national parks, marking a 4% increase over the previous year. Great Smoky Mountains National Park led with 13.3 million visitors. Nationwide, over 400 park units are managed by the National Park Service, including national parks, monuments, memorials, and preserves. However, only 108 charge an entry fee, and additional fees apply for services such as camping, boat launches, and special tours.

The positive impact of outdoor recreation on mental health is well-documented, with studies showing that exposure to nature can reduce depression, lower stress hormone levels, and decrease the need for certain medications. According to AARP's Travel Trends Survey, nearly two-thirds of Americans aged 50 and older planned to travel in 2024, with 63% opting for domestic destinations—highlighting the strong demand for accessible and affordable recreational opportunities close to home.

AARP Maryland strongly believes that Maryland should offer a program equivalent to the federal Golden Age Pass to ensure older adults have access to the benefits of nature and recreation within our state.

We respectfully urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on SB 312. For further questions or follow-up, please contact Tammy Bresnahan at **tbresnahan@aarp.org** or by calling **410-302-8451**. Thank you for your consideration.