



Wes Moore, Governor
Aruna Miller, Lt. Governor
Josh Kurtz, Secretary
David Goshorn, Deputy Secretary

March 5, 2025

BILL NUMBER: HOUSE BILL 1299 – FIRST READER

SHORT TITLE: NATURAL RESOURCES – WESTERN MARYLAND - ELK

DEPARTMENT’S POSITION: OPPOSE

EXPLANATION OF DEPARTMENT’S POSITION

The Department respectfully opposes HB 1299 because it requires the Department to study the feasibility of reintroducing elk in Western Maryland with existing personnel and funding. The Department also fully evaluated this concept in 2011-2012 and came to the conclusion that elk were not compatible with the interests of most Western Maryland landowners and farmers. It is anticipated that the findings would be no different now.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Department studied the concept of reintroducing elk to Western Maryland in 2011-2012 by engaging in an extensive stakeholder process and conducting a habitat evaluation and professional public opinion survey. The study determined that key stakeholders, including farmers and landowners, were opposed to the concept due to the significant damage that these animals can cause to crops, fences, and automobiles. Given that the cost of farming has increased dramatically over the past 15 years, it is highly doubtful that these stakeholders would now embrace the concept. The Department routinely deals with deer damage complaints to crops, as well as bear damage, and adding another herbivore to the landscape, one that is four to five times larger than a white-tailed deer, would likely escalate these complaints significantly. The habitat evaluation conducted in 2011-2012 found that there was limited area in Western Maryland where agricultural damage would not be a concern.

Along with increased crop damage concerns, impacts to motorists must also be considered. As the number of miles driven on Maryland’s roadways has increased since 2011-2012, vehicle strikes with elk would be more likely to occur now, especially on Interstate 68 and other major routes including US 219 and 220, and SR 135 and 495. All of these roads and highways are heavily used by daily commuters and tourists to the Deep Creek Lake area. While fatalities associated with deer collisions are rare, collisions with elk, which are much larger, bring more risk of mortality to motorists, and higher damage costs to vehicles. There is not enough habitat in Western Maryland to reintroduce elk where they would not be a risk to motorists on these routes.

There are also disease implications associated with reintroducing elk to Western Maryland. The Department discovered Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in Allegany County in 2011 in white-tailed deer. Since that time, the disease has slowly spread eastward into central Maryland. Elk are susceptible to CWD, and it is very likely that they would soon contract it in Western Maryland. This would likely impact the overall success of the

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reintroduction program and could possibly have implications for spreading the disease faster since elk are known to move long distances.

Related to disease spread, due to the limited size of Allegany and Garrett counties, it is likely that elk reintroduced to Maryland would, in short time, find their way to West Virginia and/or Pennsylvania. Neither of these states have expressed interest in having elk populate these areas of their states because of the same management issues mentioned above.

Finally, the cost of reintroduction, and a lack of source animals from which to stock is a concern. It is estimated that a reintroduction project would cost a minimum of two million dollars. While a project like this would be eligible for federal funding under the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act, it would still require significant matching special funds and would use a large portion of the Department's annual federal fund apportionment. It is likely the Department's budget would not sustain a project of this magnitude. And states that have been recently involved in restocking projects have expressed challenges in finding a source of elk for a reintroduction project.

While there are significant hurdles to overcome with an elk reintroduction program in Western Maryland, there could be benefits associated with the concept. The area could benefit from significant tourism revenue from people who want to come to the area to see and photograph elk. Likewise, if an adequate elk population could be established, it may be possible to start an elk hunting season in the future that could generate additional revenue for the region and for the Department of Natural Resources. It is expected that introducing an elk hunting program would require a lengthy stakeholder process.

It is estimated that conducting a study regarding the feasibility of reintroducing elk to Western Maryland would require one FTE staff member and approximately \$75,000 to contract with a professional survey firm to conduct new surveys. It is highly likely the results of this study would mirror the results found in 2011-2012 with the exception of adjustments to financial-related estimates. Additional information from the 2011-2012 study can be furnished as needed.

BILL EXPLANATION

HB 1299 requires the Department of Natural Resources to study the biological and cultural carrying capacity of elk in Western Maryland and report the findings and recommendations to the Governor on or before October 1, 2026 as to whether elk should be reintroduced in Western Maryland.