

Wednesday, February 12, 2025

TO: Marc Korman, Chair of the House Environment and Transportation Committee; and Committee Members

FROM: Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations; Cait Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, State Policy Manager

POSITION: Support with Amendments HB 717 Natural Resources - Public Lands - Acquisition, Staffing, Operations, and Funding

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports with amendments HB 717 requested by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR). 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 are dedicated to a future where people and nature thrive together.

TNC is part of a global effort to preserve the world's remaining wild and near-natural habitats, with the goal of protecting 30 percent of the planet by 2030. We recognize that investing in land management is a key piece of realizing our desired impact from meeting that goal. Here in Maryland, the lands and waters that surround us are irreplaceable resources. They are an invaluable part of our heritage, our economy, and our identity. Economists have estimated that nature contributes trillions of dollars to the global economy each year, in the form of ecosystem services such as pollination and water filtration and storage. Maryland's outdoor recreation economy generates 109,000 direct jobs, \$14 billion in consumer spending, \$4.4 billion in wages and salaries, and \$951 million in state and local tax revenue. Investing in management staff and resources allows our state to optimize land use for the greatest environmental and economic benefits. Improving access to our state's lands brings Marylanders closer to our cultural heritage, fosters land stewardship, and offers health benefits from recreation. HB 717 aims to dedicate funding, staff, and resources to strengthen Maryland's investment in managing and maintaining our lands.

TNC recommends the following amendments to HB 717,

Under Article – Natural Resources

- **Page 9, lines 1-3:** We support the staffing formula shared within the bill language, with the exception of easement acreage. We would like to request the addition of following language at the end of line 3 - NOT INCLUDING ACREAGE FROM CONSERVATION EASEMENTS
- **Page 12, lines 5-9:** We would like to request the addition ECOLOGICAL MANAGEMENT AND RESTORATION within the list of operation and maintenance activities within lands managed by the department.
- **Page 14, lines 26-30, Page 15, lines 1-23:** Regarding the transfer of funds from Program Open Space State Land Acquisition balance to the list of other activities performed by DNR for maintenance and management of these lands. TNC requests that bill language include provisions to pay back any funds moved from the acquisition account to the management account on a three-year timeline. Our recommendation is in line with the amendments shared by the Partners for Open Space.

Maryland's protected lands are an heirloom that we all have the opportunity to experience and the responsibility to steward for future generations. Our intent in sharing these recommendations and testimony for HB 717 is to continue elevating the need for strong partnerships and dedicated funding streams for meeting the needs of our protected areas. TNC appreciates DNR's work on this bill and we look forward to working with agency partners on implementing this legislation and the programs resulting from it. We also thank the committee for your consideration of our recommended amendments to the bill.

Therefore, we urge a favorable with amendments report on HB 717.