



Committee: Environment and Transportation Committee

Bill Number: House Bill 717- Natural Resources - Public Lands-Acquisition, Staffing, Operations, and Funding.

Position: Favorable with Amendments

Hearing Date: February 12, 2025

The Conservation Fund is a top-ranked national nonprofit that protects land and water resources across America. We protect wildlife habitat, working forests and farms, parks, battlefields, historic sites and more. Our land conservation work brings economic benefits, whether we are saving working forests that provide timber and jobs or recreation destinations that provide tourism dollars. We know how lucky we are in Maryland to have Program Open Space as a tool for protecting natural resources and driving natural resource economies state-wide.

Program Open Space is a nationally respected land conservation program. It is the funding mechanism that has allowed early achievement of the goal to protect 30% of the state by the year 2030 (30x30). Program Open Space will no doubt be critical to achieving the added goal of protecting 40% of the state by 2040. 40X40. Both conservation goals were passed by the Maryland legislature, recognizing the critical importance of land conservation to human health, biodiversity, water quality, and climate adaptation.

In part, HB 717 allows the Department of Natural Resources at their discretion to “sweep” state land acquisition (“Stateside”) funds more than \$80M at the end of a fiscal year to the existing *Forest or Park Reserve Fund* for operations, maintenance, and staffing. The “Stateside” component of Program Open Space that primarily provides funding for public access resulting in health and economic benefits for Maryland residents. While we understand the significant nature of Maryland’s current budget shortfall and recognize that acquisition and operations funding are both essential; it is imperative that the Department of Natural Resources maintain the ability to capitalize on outstanding conservation acquisitions when those opportunities arise. Historically, the State land acquisition component of Program Open Space has endured the brunt of numerous diversions. Program Open Space was intended to reflect actual market forces. When the real estate market is “good”, more money flows to Program Open Space and vice versa. Potentially diverting funds overrides this market driven feature of Program Open Space.

Maryland’s parks, forests, natural areas, and historical sites contribute greatly to the quality of life in Maryland. Visitation to these resources is also a significant economic driver. With many parks having to close because of capacity, Marylanders have voiced the demand for publicly accessible protected lands. Maryland’s Program Open Space gives us the ability to meet that increased demand and capture the economic benefits that come with it.

The Conservation Fund holds a favorable position with the inclusion of key amendments.