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2901 E. Baltimore St
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March 2, 2026

To: Maryland State Senate Budget and Taxation Committee

From: Audubon Mid-Atlantic - Jim Brown, Policy Director

Subject: Budget Reconciliation and Financing Act of 2026

Audubon Mid-Atlantic submits this testimony in support of the Governor's proposed budget for the state's environmental agencies. We acknowledge the challenges of the projected state budget, and we commend the Administration's support for DNR, MDE, MEA and Agriculture in the face of these challenges. This is an acknowledgement of the critically important work and the significant returns on investment that DNR, MDE, MEA, and MDA provides for the people, economies, and landscapes of Maryland. We respectfully urge the committee to work with the proposed budget with no further cuts.

Audubon Mid-Atlantic is the regional office of the National Audubon Society, representing over 35,000 Marylanders who advocate for the protection of birds, bird habitat, and policies protecting both birds and human communities in the face of increasing environmental challenges, habitat loss, pollution, and climate change. Over 400 species of birds rely on Maryland's waterways, forests, marshes, and meadows either year-round or on their annual hemispheric migrations. The work that MD DNR and MDE do to manage these habitats is critical, not only to birds, but to all Marylanders who rely on clean water, clean air and strong resilient economies.

Audubon seeks to highlight the following areas where we have strong collaborative partnerships with DNR, and how level funding the agency in a budget year like this one leverages partnerships to advance very important conservation work across the state in our state's public lands and waters, but also in the diverse communities that make up our state from the rural to the urban. We also seek to highlight how investments in renewable energy are critically important to make Maryland prepared for the impacts of climate change.

Maryland should be investing now more than ever in state agencies which advance natural climate solutions, habitat conservation & restoration, and climate resiliency. One way to do this is to support DNR's budget and refrain from any further cuts to transfer tax allocations and Program Open Space. The transfer tax programs are instrumental in advancing the goals of habitat restoration, water quality, and equitable access to healthy environments for everyone.

In Maryland, Program Open Space has been used to acquire and protect Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in every region of the state. IBAs are identified by the National Audubon Society in partnership with MD DNR as places of critical local and hemispheric importance to the survival of resident and migrating birds for the habit they provide. The 44 IBAs in Maryland represent the highest quality remaining habitats for vulnerable bird species. These IBAs often overlap with some of our most significant, and most visited natural areas and public lands. IBAs are therefore given the utmost protection from development pressures and are often within or near our most iconic parks and preserved land. Cuts to Program Open Space put this type of conservation and public access program at risk. In addition to bird habitat, these

special places also provide natural climate solutions, support local economies, and buffer local communities from the impacts of climate change.

One more aspect of the budget we seek to highlight is tidal marsh restoration. Protecting Maryland's Chesapeake and Coastal Bays' tidal salt marshes in partnership with MD DNR is a top priority for Audubon. Through a program called "Marshes for Tomorrow," we aim to restore 29,000 acres of threatened saltmarsh with state, federal and local partners through ecological restoration practices. Saving marshes protects disappearing bird habitat and supports local economies. We are proud to partner with MD DNR on this work.

These disappearing marshes are critically important to Maryland's cultural, economic, geographic and environmental identity. Continued investment in MD DNR programs helps advance the benefits that tidal salt marshes bring to Maryland's bird habitat, our water quality, and local economies. Investments in MD DNR's restoration of Maryland's iconic salt marshes support a broad range of livelihoods and economies in Maryland.

MD DNR and Audubon's "Marshes for Tomorrow work" in Maryland's Tidal Salt Marshes directly supports:

- Sustenance of fisheries, supporting over \$600 million of the Maryland seafood industry's impact on the Maryland Economy
- Providing the places and natural infrastructure for \$951 million in outdoor recreation and tourism spending annually in coastal Maryland
- A protective natural buffer to the \$1 Billion agriculture economy of Maryland
- A resilient coast line that can withstand the physical and economic threats of climate change and sea level rise

Across the state, investments in our open spaces, our watersheds, and public parks are critical to the health and wellbeing of all Marylanders, and to the hundreds of bird species which live in and migrate through Maryland. Now is the time to sustain the programs that support environmental protection. Science tells us birds are in decline due to climate change related habitat loss. 1/3 of all Maryland bird species experienced significant population declines in the past 50 years. The Governor's proposed budget for MD DNR will position Maryland to slow this habitat loss while investing in natural systems to protect habitat, improve water quality and increase resiliency protections for our communities and our economy.

A healthy environment and climate resilient ecosystems are the best fiscal defense we can plan for. Additional cuts to DNR threaten to reduce the agency's ability to implement and enforce the programs that guard the health and wellbeing of all Marylanders. Adequately funded environmental agencies is our best path forward. We respectfully urge you to sustain Governor Moore's proposed budget for MD DNR, MDE, MEA, and MDA in FY 2027.

Sincerely,

Jim Brown
Audubon Mid-Atlantic