

Tuesday, February 17, 2026

TO: Chair Valderamma, Chair, Economic Matters Committee, and Committee Members

FROM: Humna Sharif, Climate Adaptation Manager, The Nature Conservancy; Cait Kerr, State Policy Manager, The Nature Conservancy

POSITION: Support with Amendments HB 461 Economic Development - Rural Readiness Program and Rural Maryland Capacity Building Fund - Establishment

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports with amendments HB 461 offered by Delegate Ziegler. 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 data-driven, on-the-ground solutions that secure clean water, air, and healthy, secure living environments for our human and natural communities today and in the generations to come.

HB 461 Establishes the Rural Readiness Program administered by the Rural Maryland Council to assist Maryland's rural communities in enhancing their capacity for economic development. This legislation requires grant funding priority to be given to entities that have completed the Rural Readiness Program. HB 461 also establishes the Rural Maryland Capacity Building Fund to be administered by the Council to provide grants to support collaborative planning and capacity building initiatives that address the needs of rural communities.

TNC supports the primary goal of this legislation to support the vibrant local economies of Maryland and to ensure that grant funding is prioritized for communities most in need of economic development assistance. Our amendments in this testimony are intended to advance a more comprehensive approach to climate impacts in the state by de-siloing economic development and resilience building. **We recommend that long-term climate resilience planning be included in the bill language as eligible uses of the grant funds and priorities under the rural readiness program.**

The Climate Solutions Now Act (CSNA) passed in 2022, establishes ambitious climate mitigation goals for Maryland.¹ CSNA specifically prioritizes the development of strategies to address environmental impacts of climate change in underserved communities, as well as building climate resilience within disproportionately affected communities.² Keeping Maryland's long-term and legislatively mandated climate resilience goals in mind, we request the following amendments to HB 461 to further enhance the program's effectiveness in delivering long-term and climate resilient grant funding to Maryland's rural communities:

¹ <https://ncel.net/articles/maryland-passes-the-climate-solutions-now-act/>

² https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2022RS/chapters_noIn/Ch_38_sb0528E.pdf

On page 4, insert after line 3

- (7) FINANCIAL AND PROGRAMMATIC SUPPORT IS NEEDED FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES TO MEET THEIR CLIMATE ADAPTATION NEEDS, INCLUDING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE, BUILDING CAPACITY, AND IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES TO USE NATURE-BASED STRATEGIES TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

On page 7, strike the [AND] on line 10, and [.] on line 12, and insert as line 13:

- PROJECTS THAT BUILD RESILIENCE TO IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND INCORPORATE NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS

On page 8, strike [;] on line 2 and insert as line 3:

- CLIMATE CHANGE READINESS AND RESILIENCE

On page 8, strike [;] on line 10, and insert as line 11:

- EVALUATION OF NATURE BASED SOLUTIONS FOR CLIMATE ADAPTATION

Our intention in recommending these amendments is to expand the Rural Readiness Program’s eligibility criteria and to encourage advancing climate resilient practices in Maryland. TNC considers preparedness for climate change impacts an important aspect of Rural Readiness, and therefore, important for inclusion in this legislation. Many rural communities in Maryland are also among the most vulnerable to increasingly damaging climate change impacts.

For example, flooding due to sea level rise, extreme precipitation, and other intense weather events is increasingly frequent and costing the state millions of dollars each year. Flooding is also a life-threatening climate hazard. Last year’s precipitation-induced floods devastated parts of Western Maryland’s Garrett and Allegheny counties. On the other side of the state, our vibrant coastline is experiencing increasing sunny day flooding from sea level rise.

The 2023 Maryland Sea Level Rise Projections find that by 2050, Maryland will experience 1–1.5 feet of sea level rise, and by 2100, the state is expected to experience three feet of sea level rise.³ Maryland’s low-lying coastal and riverine areas, including rural counties on the Eastern Shore and Western Maryland counties, are particularly vulnerable to flood events that can range in severity from minor or nuisance flooding to major flooding that be destructive for communities, residences, and infrastructure.

Flooding is by no means the only climate change impact that Maryland communities are facing, extreme heat, fire, drought, and loss of biodiversity are among other climate change impacts that our state must also adapt to. TNC enthusiastically supports the long-term climate goals that the Maryland General Assembly approved in CSNA. Our sincere hope is to see climate resilience and adaptation goals be incorporated into more legislation for a comprehensive, economy-wide approach to achieve a resilient and healthy environment for all Marylanders.

³ <https://www.umces.edu/sea-level-rise-projections>

We thank Delegate Ziegler for introducing this bill and hope that this committee will take our proposed amendments under consideration. **Therefore, we urge a favorable with amendments report on HB 461.**