

Testimony in Support of HB 1267 – Patuxent Research Refuge and Beltsville Agricultural Research Center – Zoning Classification (Protecting Patuxent Research Refuge Act)

Committee: Economic Matters

Hearing Date: Friday, March 6, 2026

Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee, My name is LAURA CONNELLY, and I am writing today to express my support for House Bill 1267 (HB 1267), a critical piece of legislation that calls for the long-term preservation of the Patuxent Research Refuge and Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC). This bill is necessary not only to safeguard our precious and dwindling open space, but to secure the many ecological benefits and unique biodiversity these remarkably uncommon assembly of lands provide.

This bill is a necessary safeguard against the misuse of eminent domain and land zoning to seize idle protected land for industrial development projects, including the SC Mag Lev, solar farms, continued large scale development and any other potential intended use of these valuable productive lands that may support upzoning to include typical urban, suburban sprawl and new development.

This legislation ensures Marylanders that the Patuxent Research Refuge lands will remain protected open space. Prince George’s County is a jurisdiction that, for more than 100 years, has undergone transition from a traditional agricultural-based economy to a growing, development-based community. Land development continues to redefine the local landscape that was once renowned for tobacco and agriculture. The County’s most recent general plan also known as Plan Prince George’s 2035 Approved General Plan (Plan 2035) designates eight Regional Transit Districts, which have the capacity to become major economic generators. While Plan 2035 is a guide for future economic activity, it also recognizes the importance of balancing growth and the benefit of protecting and restoring environmental features. Guiding principles for future growth in Plan 2035 include:

- Concentrate future growth to limit impacts
- Prioritize and focus resources
- Build on strengths and assets
- Create choice communities
- Connect neighborhoods and significant places
- **Protect valuable natural resources**

Prince George’s County developed its first ever Green Infrastructure Plan (The GI Plan) in 2005. This Plan identified 13 Special Conservation Areas (SCAs) in need of attention in Prince George’s County.

These SCAs include:

1. Beltsville Agricultural Research Center
2. Patuxent Research Refuge
3. Greenbelt National Park
4. Anacostia River
5. Belt Woods
6. Suitland Bog
7. Patuxent River Corridor
8. Jug Bay Complex
9. Piscataway National Park
10. Mattawoman Creek Stream Valley
11. Cedarville State Forest and Zekiah Swamp Watershed
12. Potomac River Shoreline
13. Broad Creek

As you can see from the list, PATUXENT RESEARCH REFUGE and BARC are listed as numbers 1 and 2. In addition to the 13 SCAs, the Code of Maryland (COMAR) lists 21 areas in Prince George's County designated as Wetlands of Special State Concern (WSSC) (COMAR 26.23.06.01, 26.23.06.02) (18 non-tidal areas, 3 tidal areas) and 1 Natural Heritage Area (COMAR 08.03.08). Almost half of these WSSC are located on, or are near, the Patuxent Research Refuge and the North Tract of BARC.

Prince George's County will continue to undergo rapid urbanization and redevelopment. However, instead of continuing the typical sprawling growth pattern, efforts at every level must ensure that our most valuable and most productive natural resources lands are also protected. Priorities in Prince George's County and the State, should stay consistent with the long-range plans and the planned development areas known as Priority Funding Areas that have been established by the Maryland Department of Planning. Growth should continue in the existing built-up area, rather than anticipating and expecting opportunities that will only create similar land developments that put pressure on budgets for new schools and new infrastructure while destroying something that is truly unique and valuable.

Preserving and improving established local neighborhoods and communities is and should be the priority. I urge the Senate to pass this HB1267 so that the County and the state will

continue to support growth that improves existing developments instead of destroying valuable green infrastructure.

This bill is important so that pressure to impact remaining lands and habitat areas with development will lessen.

Finally, the State of Maryland knows that more diverse ecosystems are more attractive to human interest, create better and healthier communities, and can drive economic activity as well. Wildlife diversity through the preservation of a wide variety of natural areas contributes to the overall economy by providing multiple opportunities for popular outdoor activities such as hiking, camping, backpacking, biking and bird watching.

The 2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation for Maryland report prepared by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, estimated that 31 percent of all Maryland citizens participated in some form of wildlife-associated recreation. The majority, or more than 1.4 million people, participated in wildlife watching activities, which included photographing, feeding, and observing wildlife. These activities generate direct, indirect, and induced effects on the economic vitality of the County. More than \$1.3 billion is spent on wildlife recreation throughout the state.

Given these basic facts that:

- this assembly of land consisting of thousands of acres is undisputably unique,
- Both the Patuxent Research refuge and BARC are identified as important Special Preservation Areas in more than one of the local jurisdictions long range plans,
- The Code of Maryland identifies portions of these lands to contain on Wetlands of Special State Concern, and
- Open space can be a considerable economic driver
- Plan 2035, the Prince George's County General plan identifies 8 other Transit Districts that are desired development hubs to be economic drivers.

Passing HB 1267 makes sense by not only supporting the desired local development pattern as documented in the land use plans of Prince George's County but preservation of open space afforded by the Patuxent Wildlife Refuge and BARC can provide healthier greener valuable communities that preserve valuable biodiversity, green infrastructure and boost economic opportunities as well. Thank you for your consideration.