



Date: February 24, 2026

Bill: SB 523 – Vernal Pool Wetlands Protection Act of 2026

Position: Support

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee:

The National Aquarium respectfully requests a favorable report for **SB 523**. The legislation would define, identify, and extend critical protections to qualified vernal pools and buffer areas across Maryland, important wetland habitats which currently lack necessary protection at both the state and federal levels.

Vernal pools, isolated seasonal bodies of water that form during the wetter months of each year, are temporary wetlands that are critical to the health of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Biologists have identified more than 700 species that depend on vernal pools in the northeastern region of the US, including wood frogs, Eastern fairy shrimp and the state-endangered tiger salamanders. The still water, presence of detritus like fallen leaves, abundance of invertebrate prey, and absence of fish predators make vernal pools ideal breeding grounds for these and other amphibians, many of which cannot breed anywhere else.

Vernal pools are also an incredibly important part of our hydrological system, serving as natural stormwater runoff ponds that capture and filter stormwater and replenish groundwater. These ‘free’ ecosystem services help supply Maryland residents with clean water in addition to their ecological benefits. A better understanding of Maryland’s vernal pools is needed to calculate specific values, yet on the global scale we know that of all terrestrial ecosystems, wetlands provide the highest value per area of ecological services¹.

One of the National Aquarium’s overarching conservation goals is to save wildlife and habitats. The ephemeral features that make vernal pools important ecosystems are the same reasons they are vulnerable to human disturbance and climate change. Paraphrasing the Aquarium’s late great General Curator Jack Cover: ‘eliminate vernal pools and you eliminate some populations of wood frogs, spotted salamanders, and valuable stormwater management and other natural services provided free of charge to sustain wildlife and people.’

Many vernal pools in Maryland are not covered by current state nontidal wetland regulations. Additionally, federal wetlands protections have seen a precipitous and concerning decline. About two-thirds of all U.S. wetlands, including vernal pools, lost Clean Water Act protections administered by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) following the 2023 *Sackett v. EPA* Supreme Court decision. The EPA’s recent proposal to further narrow the scope of wetlands and other water bodies protected by the Clean Water Act emphasizes the need for Maryland to act now to ensure our vernal pool ecosystems continue to provide critical habitat and ecosystem services.

We appreciate the ongoing work by Department of the Environment and Department of Natural Resources and many others throughout the state to better understand and characterize vernal pools. This legislation builds on that work to further improve wetland science and conservation

¹ Costanza, R., et al. 1997. The value of the world’s ecosystem services and natural capital. *NATURE*, 387.
https://www.robertcostanza.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/1997_J_Costanza_Nature.pdf

for the benefit of wildlife and all Marylanders. **We urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on SB 523.**

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