

Tuesday, February 24, 2026

TO: Brian Feldman, Chair of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee, and Committee Members

FROM: Humna Sharif, The Nature Conservancy, Climate Adaptation Manager; Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations

POSITION: Support SB 523 Department of the Environment – Water Resources – Protection of Vernal Pools (Vernal Pool Wetlands Protection Act of 2026)

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports SB 523 offered by Senator Washington. SB 523 mandates the Department of the Environment (MDE) to create regulations aimed at protecting and preserving vernal pools in Maryland. Vernal pools are seasonal wetlands that host unique ecosystems and contribute significantly to the state's biodiversity. Vernal pools can often be an overlooked habitat because of their small size and temporal nature, but their contributions to our state's biodiversity are big. This legislation would require the Maryland Department of the Environment to establish protection for vernal pools and adjacent buffers in the state.

Vernal pools nurture rare and unique species in Maryland that rely solely on these ephemeral habitats for their survival. These habitats are sanctuaries for wood frogs, eastern spadefoot frogs, mole salamanders, fairy shrimp and many other species in Maryland. Species like the fairy shrimp and other invertebrates use vernal pools for their entire life cycle. Many species that rely on vernal pools for breeding are listed as rare, threatened, or endangered, for example, the eastern tiger salamander. The loss of vernal pools and the critical terrestrial habitat around them can lead to the loss of local amphibian species, a decrease in our state's biodiversity, and a decline in food available for many other animals that live in proximity. With increased pressures from development, urbanization, and climate change, these delicate ecosystems are facing unprecedented threats requiring urgent action from state regulatory bodies for their protection. SB 523 would help protect these small but important ecosystems.

TNC is part of a global effort to preserve the world's remaining wild and near-natural habitats, with the goal of protecting 30 percent of the planet by 2030. Each year, the United States loses an area the size of Delaware to development and unsustainable use. This land and biodiversity loss can often be irreversible. Here in Maryland, the lands and waters that surround us are irreplaceable resources. They are an invaluable part of our heritage, our economy, and our identity. Climate change and a wide range of human activities are impacting habitats at an unprecedented and unsustainable rate. The precipitous decline in biodiversity is one of our greatest challenges; it is jeopardizing food and water supplies and undermining global, social and economic stability. Economists have estimated that nature contributes trillions of dollars to the global economy each year, in the form of ecosystem services such as pollination and water filtration and storage.

By creating a protection framework for vernal pools, Maryland can take marked steps to reverse biodiversity loss in our state in order to create a future where natural areas can support the most vulnerable species and can continue to provide valuable ecosystem services on which Marylanders depend. We commend Senator Washington for offering SB 523, which sets Maryland on a path towards long-term protection of vernal pools by defining them in law and creating regulations for identifying and protecting these ecosystems in our state. **For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on SB 523.**