



Testimony in OPPOSITION of Senate Bill 875 – Oysters – Rotational Harvest – Pilot Program

Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

March 10, 2026

Dear Chair Feldman and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in **OPPOSITION OF SB875**, on behalf of Arundel Rivers Federation. Deeply rooted in the South, West, and Rhode Rivers, Arundel Rivers Federation heals and protects our waterways and champions clean water across Maryland. Our vision is healthy waterways for all, and we achieve our mission through restoration, education and outreach, and Riverkeeper programs.

Senate Bill 875 would require the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to create a rotational harvest program in four oyster sanctuaries – including one of Maryland’s future restoration sanctuaries and current community-invested sanctuary in Herring Bay.

Maryland established its oyster sanctuaries in 2010 as part of a comprehensive, three-part strategy to rebuild depleted oyster populations. By prohibiting harvest within sanctuary boundaries, oysters are able to grow larger and live longer, significantly increasing their reproductive output. These mature oysters release larvae that can disperse well beyond sanctuary borders, helping to repopulate surrounding waters. When disease affects oyster populations, the individuals that survive are able to reproduce, passing along the traits that enabled their survival. Over time, this natural selection process can foster greater genetic resistance to disease—an outcome already documented in Virginia. Sanctuaries also protect reef structure from destructive harvesting methods, such as power dredging, which can flatten and damage the three-dimensional habitat that oysters and many other species depend on.¹ Opening these areas to harvest, as required under SB875, would undermine these objectives and substantially diminish the likelihood of achieving these critical ecological benefits.

By definition, oyster sanctuaries are areas permanently protected from harvest. Their ecological value depends on minimizing disturbance, preserving adult breeding populations, and maintaining intact reef habitat—conditions that cannot be sustained under routine harvesting pressure. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources has previously recommended setting aside at least 20–30% of productive oyster habitat as no-harvest sanctuaries to meet ecological targets. It is unclear if by opening these sanctuaries to rotational harvest, other locations will be closed to harvest to maintain our percentage of productive oyster habitat in sanctuary. We recommend the state explore this concept within existing areas already open to the public as opposed to sanctuaries.

As a Commissioner on the Maryland Oyster Advisory Commission, I am respectfully asking you for an unfavorable vote on SB875. The Commission is tasked with providing the Department with advice on matters related to oysters, reviewing and recommending changes to the management of oysters, and developing a consensus in recommendations for fishery management for oysters in the Bay. This bill directly undermines the efforts of the Commission, which is currently discussing a number of recommendations for how to reinvest in some of these specific sanctuaries.

Sincerely,

 Elle Bassett

South, West, and Rhode Riverkeeper

¹ Wade et al. (2026). Effects of harvest on bottom habitat and recruitment of oysters in the Chesapeake Bay, Maryland. *Journal of Shellfish Research* 44:3. 435-463.